

black



green

A NOVEL

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MITCHELL

Author of the Man Booker Prize Finalist
CLOUD ATLAS

Black Swan Green

DAVID MITCHELL



Black Swan Green

Also by David Mitchell

Ghostwritten

number9dream

Cloud Atlas

Black Swan Green

DAVID MITCHELL



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A Sceptre Book

1

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Black Swan Green

Contents

[January Man](#)

[Hangman](#)

graph-definition>

[Relatives](#)

graph-definition>

[Bridlepath](#)

graph-definition>

[Rocks](#)

graph-definition>

[Spooks](#)

graph-definition>

[Solarium](#)

graph-definition>

[Souvenirs](#)

graph-definition>

[Maggot](#)

graph-definition>

[Knife Grinder](#)

graph-definition>

[Goose Fair](#)

graph-definition>

[Disco](#)

graph-definition>

[January Man](#)

graph-definition>

[Acknowledgements](#)

January Man

Do not set foot in my office. That's Dad's rule. But the phone'd rung twenty-five times. Normal people give up after ten or eleven, unless it's a matter of life or death. Don't they? Dad's got an answering machine like James Garner's in *The Rockford Files* with big reels of tape. But he's stopped leaving it switched on recently. Thirty rings, the phone got to. Julia couldn't hear it up in her converted attic 'cause 'Don't You Want Me?' by Human League was thumping out dead loud. Forty rings. Mum couldn't hear 'cause the washing machine was on berserk cycle and she was hoovering the living room. Fifty rings. That's just not normal. S'pose Dad'd been mangled by a juggernaut on the M5 and the police only had this office

number 'cause all his other ID'd got incinerated? We could lose our final chance to see our charred father in the terminal ward.

So I went in, thinking of the bride going into Bluebeard's chamber after being told not to. (Bluebeard, mind, was waiting for that to happen.) Dad's office smells of pound notes, papery but metallic too. The blinds were down so it felt like evening, not ten in the morning. There's a serious clock on the wall, exactly the same make as the serious clocks on the walls at school. There's a photo of Dad shaking hands with Craig Salt when Dad got made regional sales director for Greenland (Greenland the supermarket chain, not Greenland the country). Dad's IBM computer sits on the steel desk. Thousands of pounds, IBMs cost. The office phone's red like a nuclear hotline and it's got buttons you push, not the dial you get on normal phones.

So anyway, I took a deep breath, picked up the receiver and said our number. I can say that without stammering, at least. Usually.

But the person on the other end didn't answer.

'Hello?' I said. 'Hello?'

They breathed in like they'd cut themselves on paper.

'Can you hear me? I can't hear you.'

Very faint, I recognized the Sesame Street music.

'If you can hear me,' I remembered a Children's Film Foundation film where this happened, 'tap the phone, once.'

There was no tap, just more Sesame Street.

'You might have the wrong number,' I said, wondering.

A baby began wailing and the receiver was slammed down.

When people listen they make a listening noise.

I'd heard it, so they'd heard me.

‘May as well be hanged for a sheep as hanged for a handkerchief.’ Miss Throckmorton taught us that aeons ago. ‘Cause I’d sort of had a reason to come into the forbidden chamber, I peered through Dad’s razor-sharp blind, over the Glebe, past the cockerel tree, over more fields, up to the Malvern Hills. Pale morning, icy sky, frosted crusts on the hills but no sign of sticking snow, worse luck. Dad’s swivelly chair’s a lot like the Millennium Falcon’s laser tower. I blasted away at the skyful of Russian MiGs streaming over the Malverns. Soon tens of thousands of people between here and Cardiff owed me their lives. The Glebe was littered with mangled fuselages and blackened wings. I’d shoot the Soviet airmen with tranquillizer darts as they pressed their ejector seats. Our marines’d mop them up. I’d refuse all medals. ‘Thanks, but no thanks,’ I’d tell Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan when Mum invited them in, ‘I was just doing my job.’

Dad’s got this fab pencil-sharpener clamped to his desk. It makes pencils sharp enough to puncture body armour. H pencils’re sharpest, they’re Dad’s faves. I prefer 2Bs.

The doorbell went. I put the blind back to how it was, checked I’d left no other traces of my incursion, slipped out and flew downstairs to see who it was. The last six steps I took in one death-defying bound.

Moron, grinny-zitty as ever. His bumfluff's getting thicker, mind. ‘You’ll never guess what!’

‘What?’

‘You know the lake in the woods?’

‘What about it?’

‘It’s only,’ Moron checked we weren’t being overheard, ‘gone and froze solid! Half the kids in the village’re there, right now. Ace doss or what?’

‘Jason!’ Mum appeared from the kitchen. ‘You’re letting the cold in! Either invite Dean inside – hello, Dean – or shut the door.’

‘Um...just going out for a bit, Mum.’

‘Um...where?’

‘Just for some healthy fresh air.’

That was a strategic mistake. ‘What are you up to?’

I wanted to say ‘Nothing’ but Hangman decided not to let me. ‘Why would I be up to anything?’ I avoided her stare as I put on my navy duffel coat.

‘What’s your new black parka done to offend you, may I ask?’

I still couldn’t say ‘Nothing’. (Truth is, black means you fancy yourself as a hard-knock. Adults can’t be expected to understand.) ‘My duffel’s a bit warmer, that’s all. It’s parky out.’

‘Lunch is one o’clock sharp.’ Mum went back to changing the Hoover bag. ‘Dad’s coming home to eat. Put on a woolly hat or your head’ll freeze.’

Woolly hats’re gay but I could stuff it in my pocket later.

‘Goodbye, then, Mrs Taylor,’ said Moron.

‘Goodbye, Dean,’ said Mum.

Mum’s never liked Moron.

Moron's my height and he's okay but Jesus he pongs of gravy. Moron wears ankle-flappers from charity shops and lives down Drugger's End in a brick cottage that pongs of gravy too. His real name's Dean Moran (rhymes with 'warren') but our PE teacher Mr Carver started calling him 'Moron' in our first week and it's stuck. I call him 'Dean' if we're on our own but names aren't just names. Kids who're really popular get called by their first names, so Nick Yew's always just 'Nick'. Kids who're a bit popular like Gilbert Swinyard have sort of respectful nicknames like 'Yardy'. Next down are kids like me who call each other by our surnames. Below us are kids with piss-take nicknames like Moran Moron or Nicholas Briar who's Knickerless Bra. It's all ranks, being a boy, like the army. If I called Gilbert Swinyard, just 'Swinyard' he'd kick my face in. Or if I called Moron 'Dean' in front of everyone, it'd damage my own standing. So you've got to watch out.

Girls don't do this so much, 'cept for Dawn Madden, who's a boy gone wrong in some experiment. Girls don't scrap so much as boys either. (That said, just before we broke up for Christmas, Dawn Madden and Andrea Bozard started yelling 'Bitch!' and 'Slag!' in the bus queues after school. Punching tits and pulling hair and everything, they were.) Wish I'd been born a girl, sometimes. They're generally loads more civilized. But if I ever admitted that out loud I'd get BUMHOLE PLUMBER scrawled on my locker. That happened to Floyd Chaceley for admitting he liked Johann Sebastian Bach. Mind you, if they knew Eliot Bolivar who gets poems printed in the Black Swan Green parish magazine was me, they'd gouge me to death behind the tennis courts with blunt woodwork tools and spray the Sex Pistols logo on my gravestone.

So anyway, as Moron and I walked to the lake he told me about the Scalectrix he'd got for Christmas. On Boxing Day its transformer blew up and nearly wiped out his entire family. 'Yeah, sure,' I said. But Moron swore it on his nan's grave. So I told him he should write to That's Life on the BBC and get Esther Rantzen to make the manufacturer pay compensation. Moron thought that might be difficult 'cause his dad'd bought it off a Brummie at Tewkesbury Market on Christmas Eve. I didn't dare ask what a 'Brummie' was in case it's the same as 'bummer' or

'bumboy', which means homo. 'Yeah,' I said, 'see what you mean.' Moron asked me what I'd got for Christmas. I'd actually got £13.50 in book tokens and a poster of Middle Earth, but books're gay so I talked about the Game of Life which I'd got from Uncle Brian and Aunt Alice. It's a board game you win by getting your little car to the end of the road of life first, and with most money. We crossed the crossroads by the Black Swan and went into the woods. Wished I'd rubbed Vaseline into my lips 'cause they get chapped when it's this cold.

Soon we heard kids through the trees, shouting and screaming. 'Last one to the lake's a spaz!' yelled Moron, haring off before I was ready. Straight off he tripped over a frozen tyre rut, went flying and landed on his arse. Trust Moran. 'I think I might've got concussion,' he said.

'Concussion's if you hit your head. Unless your brain's up your arse.' What a line. Pity nobody who matters was around to hear it.

The lake in the woods was epic. Tiny bubbles were trapped in the ice like in Fox's Glacier Mints. Neal Brose had proper Olympic ice-skates he hired out for 5p a go, though Pete Redmarley was allowed to use them for free so other kids'd see him speed-skating around and want a go too. Just staying up on the ice is hard enough. I fell over loads before I got the knack of sliding in my trainers. Ross Wilcox turned up with his cousin Gary Drake and Dawn Madden. All three're pretty good skaters. Drake and Wilcox're taller than me too now. (They'd cut the fingers off of their gloves to show the scars they'd got playing Scabby Queen. Mum'd murder me.) Squelch sat on the humpy island in the middle of the lake where the ducks normally live shouting 'Arse over tit! Arse over tit!' at whoever fell over. Squelch's funny in the head 'cause he was born too early so nobody ever thumps him one. Not hard, anyway. Grant Burch rode his servant Philip Phelps's Raleigh Chopper actually on the ice. He kept his balance for a few seconds, but when he pulled a wheelie the bike went flying. After it landed it looked like Uri Geller'd tortured it to death. Phelps grinned sicklily. Bet he was wondering what he'd tell his dad. Then Pete Redmarley and Grant Burch decided the frozen lake'd be perfect for British Bulldogs. Nick Yew said, 'Okay, I'm on for that,' so it was decided. I hate British Bulldogs. When Miss Throckmorton banned it at our primary school after Lee Biggs lost three teeth playing it, I was dead relieved. But this morning any kid who denied loving British Bulldogs'd've looked a total ponce. Specially kids from up Kingfisher Meadows like me.

About twenty or twenty-five of us boys, plus Dawn Madden, stood in a bunch to be picked like slaves in a slave market. Grant Burch and Nick Yew were joint captains of one team. Pete Redmarley and Gilbert Swinyard were the captains of the other. Ross Wilcox and Gary Drake both got picked before me by Pete Redmarley, but I got picked by Grant Burch on the sixth pass, which wasn't embarrassingly late. Moron and Squelch were the last two left. Grant Burch and Pete Redmarley joked, 'No, you can have 'em both, we want to win!' and Moron and Squelch had to laugh like they thought it was funny too. Maybe Squelch really did. (Moron didn't. When everyone looked away, he had the same face as that time after we all told him we were playing hide and seek and sent him off to hide. It took an hour

for him to work out nobody was looking for him.) Nick Yew won the toss so us lot were the Runners first and Pete Redmarley's team were the Bulldogs. Unimportant kids' coats were put at either end of the lake as goalmouths to reach through and to defend. Girls, apart from Dawn Madden, and titches were cleared off the ice. Redmarley's Bulldogs formed a pack in the middle and us Runners slid to our starting goal. My heart was drumming now. Bulldogs and Runners crouched like sprinters. The captains led the chant.

‘British Bulldogs! One Two Three!’

Screaming like kamikazes, we charged. I slipped over (accidentally on purpose) just before the front wave of Runners smashed into the Bulldogs. This'd tie up most of the hardest Bulldogs in fights with our front Runners. (Bulldogs have to pin down both shoulders of Runners on to the ice for long enough to shout 'British Bulldogs One Two Three'.) With luck, my strategy'd clear some spaces to dodge through and on to our home goalposts. My plan worked pretty well at first. The Tookey brothers and Gary Drake all crashed into Nick Yew. A flying leg kicked my shin but I got past them without coming a cropper. But then Ross Wilcox came homing in on me. I tried to wriggle past but Wilcox got a firm grip on my wrist and tried to pull me down. But instead of trying to struggle free I got a firmer grip on his wrist and flung him off me straight into Ant Little and Darren Croome. Ace in the face or what? Games and sports aren't about taking part or even about winning. Games and sports're really about humiliating your enemies. Lee Biggs tried a poxy rugby tackle on me but I shook him free no sweat. He's too worried about the teeth he's got left to be a decent Bulldog. I was the fourth Runner home. Grant Burch shouted, 'Nice work, Jacey-boy!' Nick Yew'd fought free of the Tookeys and Gary Drake and got home too. About a third of the Runners got captured and turned into Bulldogs for the next pass. I hate that about British Bulldogs. It forces you to be a traitor.

So anyway, we all chanted, 'British Bulldogs One Two THREE!' and charged like last time but this time I had no chance. Ross Wilcox and Gary Drake and Dawn Madden targeted me from the start. No matter how I tried to dodge through the fray it was hopeless. I hadn't got halfway across the lake before they got me. Ross Wilcox went for my legs, Gary Drake toppled me and Dawn Madden sat on my chest and pinned my shoulders down with her knees. I just lay there and let them convert me into a Bulldog. In my heart I'd always be a Runner. Gary Drake gave me a dead leg, which might or might not've been on purpose. Dawn Madden's got cruel eyes like a Chinese empress and sometimes one glimpse at school makes me think about her all day. Ross Wilcox jumped up and punched the air like he'd scored at Old Trafford. The spazzo. 'Yeah, yeah, Wilcox,' I said, 'three against one, well done.' Wilcox flashed me a V-sign and slid off for another

battle. Grant Burch and Nick Yew came windmilling at a thick pocket of Bulldogs and half of them went flying.

Then Gilbert Swinyard yelled at the top of his lungs, ‘PIIIIII-ONNNNNNNN!’ That was the signal for every Runner and every Bulldog on the lake to throw themselves on to a wriggling, groaning, growing pyramid of kids. The game itself was sort of forgotten. I held back, pretending to limp a bit from my dead leg. Then we heard the sound of a chainsaw in the woods, flying down the track, straight towards us.

The chainsaw wasn't a chainsaw. It was Tom Yew on his purple Suzuki 150cc scrambler. Pluto Noak was clinging to the back, without a helmet. British Bulldogs was aborted 'cause Tom Yew's a minor legend in Black Swan Green. Tom Yew serves in the Royal Navy on a frigate called HMS Coventry. Tom Yew's got every Led Zep album ever made and can play the guitar introduction to 'Stairway To Heaven'. Tom Yew's actually shaken hands with Peter Shilton, the England goalkeeper. Pluto Noak's a less shiny legend. He left school without even taking his CSEs last year. Now he works in the pork scratchings factory in Upton upon Severn. (There's rumours Pluto Noak's smoked cannabis but obviously it wasn't the type that cauliflowerizes your brain and makes you jump off roofs on to railings.) Tom Yew parked his Suzuki by the bench at the narrow end of the lake and sat on it, side-saddle. Pluto Noak thumped his back to say thanks and went to speak to Colette Turbot, who, according to Moron's sister Kelly, he's had sexual intercourse with. The older kids sat on the bench facing him, like Jesus's disciples, and passed round fags. (Ross Wilcox and Gary Drake smoke now. Worse still, Ross Wilcox asked Tom Yew something about Suzuki silencers and Tom Yew answered him like Ross Wilcox was eighteen too.) Grant Burch told his servant Phelps to run and get him a peanut Yorkie and a can of Top Deck from Rhydd's shop, yelling after him, 'Run, I told yer!' to impress Tom Yew. Us middle-rank kids sat round the bench on the frosty ground. The older kids started talking about the best things on TV over Christmas and New Year. Tom Yew started saying he'd seen The Great Escape and everyone agreed everything else'd been crap compared to The Great Escape, specially the bit where Steve McQueen gets caught by Nazis on the barbed wire. But then Tom Yew said he thought it'd gone on a bit long and everyone agreed that though the film was classic it'd dragged on for ages. (I didn't see it 'cause Mum and Dad watched The Two Ronnies Christmas Special. But I paid close attention so I can pretend to've watched it when school starts next Monday.)

The talk'd shifted, for some reason, to the worst way to die.

'Gettin' bit by a green mamba,' Gilbert Swinyard reckoned. 'Deadliest snake in the world. Yer organs burst so yer piss mixes with yer blood.'

Agony.'

'Agony, sure,' sniffed Grant Burch, 'but you're dead pretty quick. Havin' yer skin unpeeled off yer like a sock, that's worse. Apache Indians do that to yer. The best ones can make it last the whole night.'

Pete Redmarley said he'd heard of this Vietcong execution. 'They strips yer, ties yer up, then rams Philadelphia cheese up yer jax. Then they locks yer in a coffin with a pipe goin' in. Then they send starving rats down the pipe. The rats eats through the cheese, then carry on chewin', into you.'

Everyone looked at Tom Yew for the answer. 'I get this dream.' He took a drag on his cigarette that lasted an age. 'I'm with the last bunch of survivors, after an atomic war. We're walking up a motorway. No cars, just weeds. Every time I look behind me, there're fewer of us. One by one, you see, the radiation's getting them.' He glanced at his brother Nick, then over the frozen lake. 'It's not that I'll die that bothers me. It's that I'll be the last one.'

Nobody said a lot for a bit.

Ross Wilcox swivelled our way. He took a drag on his cigarette that lasted an age, the poser. 'If it wasn't for Winston Churchill you lot'd all be speakin' German now.'

Sure, like Ross Wilcox would've evaded capture and headed a resistance cell. I was dying to tell that prat that actually, if the Japanese hadn't bombed Pearl Harbor, America'd never've come into the war, Britain'd've been starved into surrender and Winston Churchill'd've been executed as a war criminal. But I knew I couldn't. There were swarms of stammer-words in there and Hangman's bloody merciless this January. So I said I was busting for a waz, stood up and went down the path to the village a bit. Gary Drake shouted, 'Hey, Taylor! Shake your dong more than twice, you're playing with it!', which got fat laughs from Neal Brose and Ross Wilcox. I flashed them a V-sign over my shoulder. That stuff about shaking your dong's a craze at the moment. There's no one I can trust to ask what it means.

Trees're always a relief, after people. Gary Drake and Ross Wilcox might've been slagging me off, but the fainter the voices became, the less I wanted to go back. I loathed myself for not putting Ross Wilcox in his place about speaking German, but it'd've been death to've started stammering back there. The cladding of frost on thorny branches was thawing and fat drops drip-drip-dripping. It soothed me, a bit. In little pits where the sun couldn't reach there was still some gravelly snow left, but not enough to make a snowball. (Nero used to kill his guests by making them eat glass food, just for a laugh.) A robin, I saw, a woodpecker, a magpie, a blackbird and far off I think I heard a nightingale, though I'm not sure you get them in January. Then, where the faint path from the House in the Woods meets the main path to the lake, I heard a boy, gasping for breath, pounding this way. Between a pair of wishbone pines I squeezed myself out of sight. Phelps dashed by, clutching his master's peanut Yorkie and a can of Tizer. (Rhydd's must be out of Top Deck.) Behind the pines a possible path led up the slant. I know all the paths in this part of the woods, I thought. But not this one. Pete Redmarley and Grant Burch'd start up British Bulldogs again when Tom Yew left. That wasn't much of a reason to go back. Just to see where the path might go, I followed it.

There's only one house in the woods so that's what we call it, the House in the Woods. An old woman was s'posed to live there, but I didn't know her name and I'd never seen her. The house's got four windows and a chimney, same as a little kid's drawing of a house. A brick wall as tall as me surrounds it and wild bushes grow higher. Our war games in the woods steered clear of the building. Not 'cause there're any ghost stories about it or anything. It's just that part of the woods isn't good.

But this morning the house looked so hunkered down and locked up, I doubted anyone was still living there. Plus, my bladder was about to split, and that makes you less cautious. So I peed up against the frosted wall. I'd just finished signing my autograph in steamy yellow when a rusty gate opened up with a tiny shriek and there stood a sour aunt from black-and-white times. Just standing there, staring at me.

My pee ran dry.

'God! Sorry!' I zipped up my fly, expecting an utter bollocking. Mum'd flay any kid she found pissing against our fence alive, then feed his body to the compost bin. Including me. 'I didn't know anyone was living...here.'

The sour aunt carried on looking at me.

Pee dribbles blotted my underpants.

'My brother and I were born in this house,' she said, finally. Her throat was saggy like a lizard's. 'We have no intention of moving away.'

'Oh...' I still wasn't sure if she was about to open fire on me. 'Good.'

'How noisy you youngsters are!'

'Sorry.'

'It was very careless of you to wake my brother.'

My mouth'd glued up. 'It wasn't me making all the noise. Honestly.'

‘There are days,’ the sour aunt never blinked, ‘when my brother loves youngsters. But on days like these, my oh my, you give him the furies.’

‘Like I said, I’m sorry.’

‘You’ll be sorrier,’ she looked disgusted, ‘if my brother gets a hold of you.’

Quiet things were too loud and loud things couldn’t be heard.

‘Is he...uh, around? Now? Your brother, I mean?’

‘His room’s just as he left it.’

‘Is he ill?’

She acted like she hadn’t heard me.

‘I’ve got to go home now.’

‘You’ll be sorrier,’ she did that spitty chomp old people do to not dribble, ‘when the ice cracks.’

‘The ice? On the lake? It’s as solid as anything.’

‘You always say so. Ralph Bredon said so.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘Ralph Bredon. The butcher’s boy.’

It didn’t feel at all right. ‘I’ve got to go home now.’

Lunch at 9 Kingfisher Meadows, Black Swan Green, Worcestershire, was Findus ham'n'cheese Crispy Pancakes, crinkle-cut oven chips and sprouts. Sprouts taste of fresh puke but Mum said I had to eat five without making a song and dance about it, or there'd be no butterscotch Angel Delight for pudding. Mum says she won't let the dining table be used as a venue for 'adolescent discontent'. Before Christmas I asked what not liking the taste of sprouts had to do with 'adolescent discontent'. Mum warned me to stop being a Clever Little Schoolboy. I should've shut up but I pointed out that Dad never makes her eat melon (which she hates) and Mum never makes Dad eat garlic (which he hates). She went ape and sent me to my room. When Dad got back I got a lecture about arrogance.

No pocket money that week, either.

So anyway, this lunch-time I cut my sprouts up into tiny pieces and glopped tomato ketchup over them. 'Dad?'

'Jason?'

'If you drown, what happens to your body?'

Julia rolled her eyes like Jesus on his cross.

'Bit of a morbid topic for the dinner table.' Dad chewed his forkful of crispy pancake. 'Why do you ask?'

It was best not to mention the frozen-up pond. 'Well, in this book Arctic Adventure these two brothers Hal and Roger Hunt're being chased by a baddie called Kaggs who falls into the—'

Dad held up his hand to say Enough! 'Well, in my opinion, Mr Kaggs gets eaten by fish. Picked clean.'

'Do they have piranhas in the Arctic?'

‘Fish’ll eat anything once it’s soft enough. Mind you, if he fell into the Thames, his body’d wash up before long. The Thames always gives up its dead, the Thames does.’

My misdirection was complete. ‘How about if he fell through ice, into a lake, say? What’d happen to him then? Would he sort of stay...deep frozen?’

‘Thing,’ Julia mewled, ‘is being grotesque while we’re eating, Mum.’

Mum rolled up her napkin. ‘Lorenzo Hussiantree’s has a new range of tiles in, Michael.’ (My abortion of a sister flashed me a victorious grin.) ‘Michael?’

‘Yes, Helena?’

‘I thought we could drop by Lorenzo Hussiantree’s showroom on our way to Worcester. New tiles. They’re exquisite.’

‘No doubt Lorenzo Hussiantree charges exquisite prices, to match?’

‘We’re having workmen in anyway, so why not make a proper job of it? The kitchen’s getting embarrassing.’

‘Helena, why—’

Julia sees arguments coming even before Mum and Dad sometimes. ‘Can I get down now?’

‘Darling,’ Mum looked really hurt, ‘it’s butterscotch Angel Delight.’

‘Yummy, but could I have mine tonight? Got to get back to Robert Peel and the Enlightened Whigs. Anyway, Thing has ruined my appetite.’

‘Pigging on Cadbury’s Roses with Kate Alfrick,’ I counter-attacked, ‘is what’s ruined your appetite.’

‘So where did the Terry’s Chocolate Orange go, Thing?’

‘Julia,’ Mum sighed, ‘I do wish you wouldn’t call Jason that. You’ve only got one brother.’

Julia said, ‘One too many,’ and got up.

Dad remembered something. ‘Have either of you been into my office?’

‘Not me, Dad.’ Julia hovered in the doorway, scenting blood. ‘Must’ve been my honest, charming, obedient, younger sibling.’

How did he know?

‘It’s a simple enough question.’ Dad had hard evidence. The only adult I know who bluffs kids is Mr Nixon, our headmaster.

The pencil! When Dean Moran rang the doorbell I must’ve left the pencil in the sharpener. Damn Moron. ‘Your phone was ringing for yonks, like four or five minutes, honestly, so—’

‘What’s the rule,’ Dad didn’t care, ‘about not going into my office?’

‘But I thought it might be an emergency so I picked it up and there was’ – Hangman blocked ‘someone’ – ‘a person on the other end but—’

‘I believe,’ now Dad’s palm said HALT!, ‘I just asked you a question.’

‘Yes, but—’

‘What question did I just ask you?’

““What’s the rule about not going into my office?””

‘So I did.’ Dad’s a pair of scissors at times. Snip snip snip snip. ‘Now, why don’t you answer this question?’

Then Julia did a strange move. ‘That’s funny.’

‘I don’t see anyone laughing.’

‘No, Dad, on Boxing Day when you and Mum took Thing to Worcester, the phone in your office went. Honestly, it went on for aeons. I couldn’t concentrate on my revision. The more I told myself it wasn’t a desperate ambulance or something, the likelier it seemed it was. In the end it was driving me crazy. I had no choice. I said “Hello” but the person on the other end didn’t say anything. So I hung up, in case it was a pervert.’

Dad’d gone quiet but the danger wasn’t past.

‘That was just like me,’ I ventured. ‘But I didn’t hang up straight away ’cause I thought maybe they couldn’t hear me. Was there a baby in the background, Julia?’

‘Okay, you two, enough of the private eye bizz. If some joker is making nuisance calls then I don’t want either of you answering, no matter what. If it happens again, just unplug the socket. Understand?’

Mum was just sitting there. It didn’t feel at all right.

Dad’s ‘DID YOU HEAR ME?’ was like a brick through a window. Julia and me jumped. ‘Yes, Dad.’

Mum, me and Dad ate our butterscotch Angel Delight without a word. I didn't dare even look at my parents. I couldn't ask to get down early too 'cause Julia'd already used that card. Why I was in the doghouse was clear enough, but God knows why Mum and Dad were giving each other the silent treatment. After the last spoonful of Angel Delight Dad said, 'Lovely, Helena, thank you. Jason and I'll do the washing-up, won't we, Jason?'

Mum just made this nothing-sound and went upstairs.

Dad washed up humming a nothing-song. I put the dirty dishes in the hatch, then went into the kitchen to dry. I should've just shut up, but I thought I could make the day turn safely normal if I just said the right thing. 'Do you get' (Hangman loves giving me grief over this word) 'nightingales in January, Dad? I might've heard one this morning. In the woods.'

Dad was Brillo-padding a pan. 'How should I know?'

I pushed on. Usually Dad likes talking about nature and stuff. 'But that bird at Granddad's hospice. You said it was a nightingale.'

'Huh. Fancy you remembering that.' Dad stared over the back lawn at the icicles on the summer house. Then this noise came out of Dad like he'd entered the World's Miserablest Man of 1982 Competition. 'Just concentrate on those glasses, Jason, before you drop one.' He switched on Radio 2 for the weather forecast, then began cutting up the 1981 Highway Code with scissors. Dad bought the updated 1982 Highway Code the day it came out. Tonight most of the British Isles will see temperatures plunging well below zero. Motorists in Scotland and the North should be careful of black ice on the roads, and the Midlands should anticipate widespread patches of freezing fog.

Up in my room I played the Game of Life but being two players at once is no fun. Julia's friend Kate Alfrick called for Julia to revise. But they were just gossiping about who's going out with who in the sixth form, and playing singles by the Police. My billion problems kept bobbing up like corpses in a flooded city. Mum and Dad at lunch. Hangman colonizing the alphabet. At this rate I'm going to have to learn sign language. Gary Drake and Ross Wilcox. They've never exactly been my best mates but today they'd ganged up against me. Neal Brose was in on it too. Last, the sour aunt in the woods worried me. How come?

Wished there was a crack to slip through and leave all this stuff behind. Next week I'm thirteen but thirteen looks way worse than twelve. Julia moans non-stop about being eighteen but eighteen's epic, from where I'm standing. No official bedtime, twice my pocket money, and for Julia's eighteenth she went to Tanya's Night Club in Worcester with her thousand and one friends. Tanya's got the only xenon disco laser light in Europe! How ace is that?

Dad drove off up Kingfisher Meadows, alone.

Mum must still be in her room. She's there more and more recently.

To cheer myself up I put on my granddad's Omega. Dad called me into his office on Boxing Day and said he had something very important to give me, from my grandfather. Dad'd been keeping it till I was mature enough to look after it myself. It was a watch. An Omega Seamaster de Ville. Granddad bought it off a real live Arab in a port called Aden in 1949. Aden's in Arabia and once it was British. He'd worn it every day of his life, even the moment he died. That fact makes the Omega more special, not scary. The Omega's face is silver and wide as a 50p but as thin as a tiddlywink. 'A sign of an excellent watch,' Dad said, grave as grave, 'is its thinness. Not like these plastic tubs teenagers strap to their wrist these days to strut about in.'

Where I hid my Omega is a work of genius and second in security only to my OXO tin under the loose floorboard. Using a Stanley knife I hollowed

out a crappy-looking book called Woodcraft for Boys. Woodcraft for Boys's on my shelf between real books. Julia often snoops in my room, but she's never discovered this hiding place. I'd know 'cause I keep a ½ p coin balanced on it at the back. Plus, if Julia'd found it she'd've copied my ace idea for sure. I've checked her bookshelf for false spines and there aren't any.

Outside I heard an unfamiliar car. A sky-blue VW Jetta was crawling along the kerb, as if its driver was searching for a house number. At the end of our cul-de-sac the driver, a woman, did a three-point turn, stalled once, and drove off up Kingfisher Meadows. I should've memorized the number plate in case it's on Police 999.

Granddad was the last grandparent to die, and the only one I have any memories of. Not many. Chalking roads for my Corgi cars down his garden path. Watching Thunderbirds at his bungalow in Grange-over-Sands and drinking pop called Dandelion and Burdock.

I wound the stopped Omega up and set the time to a fraction after three.

Unborn Twin murmured, Go to the lake.

The stump of an elm guards a bottleneck in the path through the woods. Sat on the stump was Squelch. Squelch's real name's Mervyn Hill but one time we were changing for PE, he pulled down his trousers and we saw he had a nappy on. About nine, he'd've been. Grant Burch started the Squelch nickname and it's been years since anyone's called him Mervyn. It's easier to change your eyeballs than to change your nickname.

So anyway, Squelch was stroking something furry and moon-grey in the crook of his elbow. 'Finders keepers, losers weepers.'

'All right, Squelch. What you got there, then?'

Squelch's got stained teeth. 'Ain't showin'!'

'Go on. You can show us.'

Squelch mumbled, 'KitKat.'

'A KitKat? A chocolate bar?'

Squelch showed me the head of a sleeping kitten. 'Kitty cat! Finders keepers, losers weepers.'

'Wow. A cat. Where'd you find her?'

'By the lake. Crack o'dawn, b'fore anyone else got to the lake. I hided her while we did British Bulldogs. Hided her in a box.'

'Why didn't you show it to anyone?'

'Burch and Swinyard and Redmarley and them bastards'd've tooked her away's why! Finders keepers, losers weepers. I hided her. Now I come back.'

You never know with Squelch. 'She's quiet, isn't she?'

Squelch just petted her.

‘Could I hold her, Merv?’

‘If you don’t breathe a word to no one,’ Squelch eyed me dubiously, ‘you can stroke her. But take them gloves off. They’re nobbly.’

So I took off my goalie gloves and reached out to touch the kitten.

Squelch lobbed the kitten at me. ‘It’s yours now!’

Taken by surprise, I’d caught the kitten.

‘Yours!’ Squelch ran off laughing back to the village. ‘Yours!’

The kitten was cold and stiff as a pack of meat from the fridge. Only now did I realize it was dead. I dropped it. It thudded.

‘Finders,’ Squelch’s voice died off, ‘keepers!’

Using two sticks, I lifted the kitten into a clump of nervy snowdrops.

So still, so dignified. Died in the frost last night, I s’pose.

Dead things show you what you’ll be too one day.

Nobody'd be out on the frozen lake, I'd suspected, and there wasn't a soul. Superman 2 was on TV. I'd seen it at Malvern cinema about three years ago on Neal Brose's birthday. It wasn't bad but not worth sacrificing my own private frozen lake for. Clark Kent gives up his powers just to have sexual intercourse with Lois Lane in a glittery bed. Who'd make such a stupid swap? If you could fly? Deflect nuclear missiles into space? Turn back time by spinning the planet in reverse? Sexual intercourse can't be that good.

I sat on the empty bench to eat a slab of Jamaican ginger cake, then went out on the ice. Without other kids watching, I didn't fall once. Round and around in swoopy anti-clockwise loops I looped, a stone on the end of a string. Overhanging trees tried to touch my head with their fingers. Rooks craw...craw...crawed, like old people who've forgotten why they've come upstairs.

A sort of trance.

The afternoon'd gone and the sky was turning to outer space when I noticed another kid on the lake. This boy skated at my speed and followed my orbit, but always stayed on the far side of the lake. So if I was at twelve o'clock, he was at six. When I got to eleven, he was at five, and so on, always across from me. My first thought was he was a kid from the village, just mucking about. I even thought he might be Nick Yew 'cause he was sort of stocky. But the strange thing was, if I looked at this kid directly for more than a moment, dark spaces sort of swallowed him up. The first couple of times I thought he'd gone home. But after another half-loop of the lake, he'd be back. Just at the edge of my vision. Once I skated across the lake to intercept him, but he vanished before I got to the island in the middle. When I carried on orbiting the pond, he was back.

Go home, urged the nervy Maggot in me. What if he's a ghost?

My Unborn Twin can't stand Maggot. What if he is a ghost?

'Nick?' I called out. My voice sounded indoors. 'Nick Yew?'

The kid carried on skating.

I called out, 'Ralph Bredon?'

His answer took a whole orbit to reach me.

Butcher's boy.

If a doctor'd told me the kid across the lake was my imagination, and that his voice was only words I thought, I wouldn't've argued. If Julia'd told me I was convincing myself Ralph Bredon was there to make myself feel more special than I am, I wouldn't've argued. If a mystic'd told me that one exact moment in one exact place can act as an antenna that picks up faint traces of lost people, I wouldn't've argued.

'What's it like?' I called out. 'Isn't it cold?'

The answer took another orbit to reach me.

You get used to the cold.

Did the kids who'd drowned in the lake down the years mind me trespassing on their roof? Do they want new kids to fall through? For company? Do they envy the living? Even me?

I called out, 'Can you show me? Show me what it's like?'

The moon'd swum into the lake in the sky.

We skated one orbit.

The shadow kid was still there, crouching as he skated, just like I was.

We skated another orbit.

An owl or something fluttered low across the lake.

'Hey?' I called out. 'Did you hear me? I want to know what it's—'

The ice shucked me off my feet. For a helter-skelter moment I was in mid-air at an unlikely height. Bruce Lee doing a karate kick, that high. I knew it wasn't going to be a soft landing but I hadn't guessed how painful a slam it'd be. The crack shattered from my ankle to my jaw to my knuckles, like an ice cube plopped into warm squash. No, bigger than an ice cube. A mirror, dropped from Skylab height. Where it hit the earth, where it smashed into daggers and thorns and invisible splinters, that was my ankle.

I spun and slid to a shuddery stop by the edge of the lake.

For a bit, all I could do was lie there, basking in that supernatural pain. Even Giant Haystacks'd've whimpered. 'Bloody bugger,' I gasped to plug my tears, 'Bloody bloody bloody bugger!' Through the flinty trees I could just hear the sound of the main road but there was no way I could walk that far. I tried to stand but just fell on my arse, wincing with fresh pain. I couldn't move. I'd die of pneumonia if I stayed where I was. I had no idea what to do.

‘You,’ sighed the sour aunt. ‘We suspected you’d come knocking again soon.’

‘I hurt,’ my voice’d gone all bendy, ‘I hurt my ankle.’

‘So I see.’

‘It’s killing me.’

‘I dare say.’

‘Can I just phone my dad to come and get me?’

‘We don’t care for telephones.’

‘Could you go and get help? Please?’

‘We don’t ever leave our house. Not at night. Not here.’

‘Please,’ the underwatery pain shook as loud as electric guitars, ‘I can’t walk.’

‘I know about bones and joints. You’d best come inside.’

Inside was colder than outside. Bolts behind me slid home and a lock turned. ‘Down you go,’ the sour aunt spoke, ‘down to the parlour. I’ll be right along, once I’ve prepared your cure. But whatever you do, be quiet. You’ll be very sorry if you wake my brother.’

‘All right...’ I glanced away. ‘Which way’s your parlour?’

But the dark’d shuffled itself and the sour aunt’d gone.

Way down the hallway was a blade of muddy light, so that was the direction I limped. God knows how I walked up the rooty, twisty path from the frozen lake on that busted ankle. But I must’ve done, to’ve got here. I passed a ladder of stairs. Enough muffled moonlight fell down it for me to

make out an old photograph hanging on the wall. A submarine in an Arctic-looking port. The crew stood on deck, all saluting. I walked on. The blade of light wasn't getting any nearer.

The parlour was a bit bigger than a big wardrobe and stuffed with museumy stuff. An empty parrot cage, a mangle, a towering dresser, a scythe. Junk, too. A bent bicycle wheel and one soccer boot, caked in silt. A pair of ancient skates, hanging on a coat-stand. There was nothing modern. No fire. Nothing electrical apart from a bare brown bulb. Hairy plants sent bleached roots out of tiny pots. God it was cold! The sofa sagged under me and ssssssssssed. One other doorway was screened by beads on strings. I tried to find a position where my ankle hurt less but there wasn't one.

Time went by, I s'pose.

The sour aunt held a china bowl in one hand and a cloudy glass in the other. 'Take off your sock.'

My ankle was balloony and limp. The sour aunt propped my calf on a footstool and knelt by it. Her dress rustled. Apart from the blood in my ears and my jagged breathing there was no other sound. Then she dipped her hand into the bowl and began smearing a bready goo on to my ankle.

My ankle shuddered.

'This is a poultice.' She gripped my shin. 'To draw out the swelling.'

The poultice sort of tickled but the pain was too vicious and I was fighting the cold too hard. The sour aunt smeared the goo on till it was used up and my ankle'd completely clagged. She handed me the cloudy glass. 'Drink this.'

'It smells like...marzipan.'

'It's for drinking. Not smelling.'

'But what is it?'

'It'll help take the pain away.'

Her face told me I had no real choice. I swigged back the liquid in one go like you do Milk of Magnesium. It was syrupy-thick but didn't taste of much. I asked, 'Is your brother asleep upstairs?'

'Where else would he be, Ralph? Shush now.'

'My name's not Ralph,' I told her, but she acted like she hadn't heard. Clearing up the misunderstanding'd've been a massive effort and now I'd stopped moving I just couldn't fight the cold any more. Funny thing was, as soon as I gave in, a lovely drowsiness tugged me downwards. I pictured Mum, Dad and Julia sitting at home watching The Paul Daniels Magic Show but their faces melted away, like reflections on the backs of spoons.

The cold poked me awake. I didn't know where or who or when I was. My ears felt bitten and I could see my breath. A china bowl sat on a footstool and my ankle was crusted in something hard and spongey. Then I remembered everything, and sat up. The pain in my foot had gone but my head didn't feel right, like a crow'd flown in and couldn't get out. I wiped the poultice off my foot with a snotty hanky. Unbelievably, my ankle swivelled fine, cured, like magic. I pulled on my sock and trainer, stood up and tested my weight. There was a faint twinge, but only 'cause I was looking for it. Through the beaded doorway I called out, 'Hello?'

No answer came. I passed through the crackly beads into a tiny kitchen with a stone sink and a massive oven. Big enough for a kid to climb in. Its door'd been left open, but inside was as dark as that cracked tomb under St Gabriel's. I wanted to thank the sour aunt for curing my ankle.

Make sure the back door opens, warned Unborn Twin.

It didn't. Neither did the frost-flowered sash window. Its catch and hinges'd been painted over long ago and it'd take a chisel to persuade it open, at least. I wondered what the time was and squinted at my granddad's Omega but it was too dark in the tiny kitchen to see. Suppose it was late evening? I'd get back and my tea'd be waiting under a Pyrex dish. Mum and Dad go ape if I'm not back in time for tea. Or s'pose it'd gone midnight? S'pose the police'd been alerted? Jesus. Or what if I'd slept right through one short day and into the night of the next? The Malvern Gazetteer and Midlands Today'd've already shown my school photo and sent out appeals for witnesses. Jesus. Squelch would've reported seeing me heading to the frozen lake. Frogmen might be searching for me there, right now.

This was a bad dream.

No, worse than that. Back in the parlour, I looked at my grandfather's Omega and saw that there was no time. My voice whimpered, 'No.' The glass face, the hour hand and minute hand'd gone and only a bent second hand was left. When I fell on the ice, it must've happened then. The casing was split and half its innards'd spilt out.

Granddad's Omega'd never once gone wrong in forty years.

In less than a fortnight, I'd killed it.

Wobbly with dread, I walked up the hallway and hissed up the twisted stairs, ‘Hello?’ Silent as night in an ice age. ‘I have to go!’ Worry about the Omega’d swatted off worry about being in this house, but I still daredn’t shout in case I woke the brother. ‘I’ve got to go home now,’ I called, a bit louder. No reply. I decided to just leave by the front door. I’d come back in the daytime to thank her. The bolts slid open easily enough, but the old-style lock was another matter. Without the key it wouldn’t open. That was that. I’d have to go upstairs, wake the old biddy to get her key and if she got annoyed that was just tough titty. Something, something, had to be done about the catastrophe of the smashed watch. God knows what, but I couldn’t do it inside the House in the Woods.

The stairs curved up steeper. Soon I had to use my hands to grip the stairs above me, or I’d’ve fallen back. How on earth the sour aunt went up and down in that big rookish dress was anybody’s guess. Finally, I hauled myself on to a tiny landing with two doors. A slitty window let in a glimmer. One door had to be the sour aunt’s room. The other had to be the brother’s.

Left’s got a power that right hasn’t so I clasped the iron door knob on the left. It sucked the warmth from my hand, my arm, my blood.

Scrit-scrat.

I froze.

Scrit-scrat.

A death-watch beetle? Rat in the loft? Pipe freezing up?

Which room was the scrit-scrat coming from?

The iron door knob made a coiling creak as I turned it.

Powdery moonlight lit the attic room through the snowflake-lace curtain. I'd guessed right. The sour aunt lay under a quilt with her dentures in a jar by her bed, still as a marble duchess on a church tomb. I shuffled over the tipsy floor, nervous at the thought of waking her. What if she forgot who I was and thought I'd come to murder her and screamed for help and had a stroke? Her hair spilt over her folded face like pondweed. A cloud of breath escaped her mouth every ten or twenty heartbeats. Only that proved she was made of flesh and blood like me.

'Can you hear me?'

No, I'd have to shake her awake.

My hand was halfway to her shoulder when that scrit-scrat noise started up again, deep inside her.

Not a snore. A death rattle.

Go into the other bedroom. Wake her brother. She needs an ambulance. No. Smash your way out. Run to Isaac Pye in the Black Swan for help. No. They'd ask why you'd been in the House in the Woods. What'd you say? You don't even know this woman's name. It's too late. She's dying, right now. I'm certain. The scrit-scrat's uncoiling. Louder, waspier, daggerier.

Her windpipe bulges as her soul squeezes out of her heart.

Her worn-out eyes flip awake like a doll's, black, glassy, shocked.

From her black crack mouth, a blizzard rushes out.

A silent roaring hangs here.

Not going anywhere.

Hangman

Dark, light, dark, light, dark, light. The Datsun's wipers couldn't keep up with the rain, not even at the fastest setting. When a juggernaut passed the other way, it slapped up spumes on to the streaming windscreen. Through this car-wash visibility I only just made out the two Ministry of Defence radars spinning at their incredible speed. Waiting for the full might of the Warsaw Pact forces. Mum and me didn't speak much on the way. Partly 'cause of where she was taking me, I think. (The dashboard clock said 16:05. In seventeen hours exactly my public execution'd take place.) Waiting at the Pelican crossing by the closed-down beautician's she asked me if I'd had a good day and I said, 'Okay.' I asked her if she'd had a good day too and she said, 'Oh, sparkingly creative and deeply fulfilling, thank you.' Dead sarky, Mum can be, even though she tells me off for it. 'Did you get any Valentine's cards?' I'd said no, but even if I'd had some I'd've told her no. (I did get one but I put it in the bin. It said 'Suck My Dick' and was signed by Nicholas Briar, but it looked like Gary Drake's handwriting.) Duncan Priest'd got four. Neal Brose got seven, or so he reckons. Ant Little found out that Nick Yew'd got twenty. I didn't ask Mum if she'd got any. Dad says Valentine's Days and Mother's Days and No-armed Goalkeeper's Days're all conspiracies of card manufacturers and flower shops and chocolate companies.

So anyway, Mum dropped me at Malvern Link traffic lights by the clinic. I forgot my diary in the glove compartment and if the lights hadn't turned red for me, Mum would've driven off to Lorenzo Hussingtree's with it. ('Jason' isn't exactly the acest name you could wish for but any 'Lorenzo' in my school'd get Bunsen-burnered to death.) Diary safe in my satchel, I crossed the flooded clinic car park leaping from dry bit to dry bit like James Bond froggering across the crocodiles' backs. Outside the clinic were a couple of second- or third-years from the Dyson Perrins School. They saw

my enemy uniform. Every year, according to Pete Redmarley and Gilbert Swinyard, all the Dyson Perrins fourth-years and all our fourth-years skive off school and meet in this secret arena walled in by gorse on Poolbrook Common for a mass scrap. If you chicken out you're a homo and if you tell a teacher you're dead. Three years ago, apparently, Pluto Noak'd hit their hardest kid so hard that the hospital in Worcester'd had to sew his jaw back on. He's still sucking his meals through a straw. Luckily it was raining too hard for the Dyson Perrins kids to bother with me.

Today was my second appointment this year so the pretty receptionist in the clinic recognized me. ‘I’ll buzz Mrs de Roo for you now, Jason. Take a seat.’ I like her. She knows why I’m here so she doesn’t make pointless conversation that’ll show me up. The waiting area smells of Dettol and warm plastic. People waiting there never look like they have much wrong with them. But I don’t either, I s’pose, not to look at. You all sit so close to each other but what can any of you talk about ’cept the thing you want to talk about least: ‘So, why are you here?’ One old biddy was knitting. The sound of her needles knitted in the sound of the rain. A hobbity man with watery eyes rocked to and fro. A woman with coat-hangers instead of bones sat reading Watership Down. There’s a cage for babies with a pile of sucked toys in it, but today it was empty. The telephone rang and the pretty receptionist answered it. It seemed to be a friend, ’cause she cupped the mouthpiece and lowered her voice. Jesus, I envy anyone who can say what they want at the same time as they think it, without needing to test it for stammer-words. A Dumbo the Elephant clock ticked this: to – mo – rrow – mor – ning’s – com – ing – soon – so – gouge – out – your – brain – with – a – spoon – you – can – not – e – ven – count – to – ten – be – gin – a – gain – a – gain – a – gain. (Quarter past four. Sixteen hours and fifty minutes to live.) I picked up a tatty National Geographic magazine. An American woman in it’d taught chimpanzees to speak in sign language.

Most people think stammering and stuttering are the same but they’re as different as diarrhoea and constipation. Stuttering’s where you say the first bit of the word but can’t stop saying it over and over. St-st-st-stutter. Like that. Stammering’s where you get stuck straight after the first bit of the word. Like this. St...AMmer! My stammer’s why I go to Mrs de Roo. (That really is her name. It’s Dutch, not Australian.) I started going that summer when it never rained and the Malvern Hills turned brown, five years ago. Miss Throckmorton’d been playing Hangman on the blackboard one afternoon with sunlight streaming in. On the blackboard was

NIGHT-INGALE

Any duh-brain could work that out, so I put up my hand. Miss Throckmorton said, ‘Yes, Jason?’ and that was when my life divided itself into Before Hangman and After Hangman. The word ‘nightingale’ kaboomed in my skull but it just wouldn’t come out. The ‘N’ got out okay, but the harder I forced the rest, the tighter the noose got. I remember Lucy Sneads whispering to Angela Bullock, stifling giggles. I remember Robin South staring at this bizarre sight. I’d’ve done the same if it hadn’t been me. When a stammerer stammers their eyeballs pop out, they go trembly-red like an evenly matched arm wrestler and their mouth gupperguppergppers like a fish in a net. It must be quite a funny sight.

It wasn’t funny for me, though. Miss Throckmorton was waiting. Every kid in the classroom was waiting. Every crow and every spider in Black Swan Green was waiting. Every cloud, every car on every motorway, even Mrs Thatcher in the House of Commons’d frozen, listening, watching, thinking, What’s wrong with Jason Taylor?

But no matter how shocked, scared, breathless, ashamed I was, no matter how much of a total flid I looked, no matter how much I hated myself for not being able to say a simple word in my own language, I couldn’t say ‘nightingale’. In the end I had to say, ‘I’m not sure, miss,’ and Miss Throckmorton said, ‘I see.’ She did see, too. She phoned my mum that evening and one week later I was taken to see Mrs de Roo, the speech therapist at Malvern Link Clinic. That was five years ago.

It must’ve been around then (maybe that same afternoon) that my stammer took on the appearance of a hangman. Pike lips, broken nose, rhino cheeks, red eyes ’cause he never sleeps. I imagine him in the baby room at Preston Hospital playing Eeny-meeny-miny-mo. I imagine him tapping my koochy lips, murmuring down at me, Mine. But it’s his hands, not his face, that I really feel him by. His snaky fingers that sink inside my tongue and squeeze my windpipe so nothing’ll work. Words beginning with ‘N’ have always been one of Hangman’s favourites. When I was nine I dreaded people asking me ‘How old are you?’ In the end I’d hold up nine fingers like I was being dead witty but I know the other person’d be

thinking, Why didn't he just tell me, the twat? Hangman used to like Y-words, too, but lately he's eased off those and has moved to S-words. This is bad news. Look at any dictionary and see which section's the thickest: it's S. Twenty million words begin with N or S. Apart from the Russians starting a nuclear war, my biggest fear is if Hangman gets interested in J-words, 'cause then I won't even be able to say my own name. I'd have to change my name by deed-poll, but Dad'd never let me.

The only way to outfox Hangman is to think one sentence ahead, and if you see a stammer-word coming up, alter your sentence so you won't need to use it. Of course, you have to do this without the person you're talking to catching on. Reading dictionaries like I do helps you do these ducks and dives, but you have to remember who you're talking to. (If I was speaking to another thirteen-year-old and said the word 'melancholy' to avoid stammering on 'sad', for example, I'd be a laughing stock, 'cause kids aren't s'posed to use adult words like 'melancholy'. Not at Upton upon Severn Comprehensive, anyway.) Another strategy is to buy time by saying 'Er...' in the hope that Hangman's concentration'll lapse and you can sneak the word out. But if you say 'er...' too much you come across as a right dimmer. Lastly, if a teacher asks you a question directly and the answer's a stammer-word, it's best to pretend you don't know. I couldn't count how often I've done this. Sometimes teachers lose their rag (specially if they've just spent half a lesson explaining something) but anything's better than getting labelled 'School Stutterboy'.

That's something I've always just about avoided, but tomorrow morning at five minutes past nine this is going to happen. I'm going to have to stand up in front of Gary Drake and Neal Brose and my entire class to read from Mr Kempsey's book, Plain Prayers for a Complicated World. There will be dozens of stammer-words in that reading which I can't substitute and I can't pretend not to know because there they are, printed there. Hangman'll skip ahead as I read, underlining all his favourite N and S words, murmuring in my ear, 'Here, Taylor, try and spit this one out!' I know, with Gary Drake and Neal Brose and everyone watching, Hangman'll crush my throat and mangle my tongue and scrunch my face up. Worse than Joey Deacon's. I'm going to stammer worse than I've ever stammered in my life. By 9.15 my

secret'll be spreading round the school like a poison gas attack. By the end of first break my life won't be worth living.

The grotesque thing I ever heard was this. Pete Redmarley swore on his nan's grave it's true so I s'pose it must be. This boy in the sixth form was sitting his A-levels. He had these parents from hell who'd put him under massive pressure to get a whole raft of 'A' grades and when the exam came this kid just cracked and couldn't even understand the questions. So what he did was get two Bic Biros from his pencil case, hold the pointy ends against his eyes, stand up and head-butt the desk. Right there, in the exam hall. The pens skewered his eyeballs so deep that only an inch was left sticking out of his drippy sockets. Mr Nixon the headmaster hushed everything up so it didn't get in the papers or anything. It's a sick and horrible story but right now I'd rather kill Hangman that way than let him kill me tomorrow morning.

I mean that.

Mrs de Roo's shoes clop so you know it's her coming to fetch you. She's forty or maybe even older, and has fat silver brooches, wispy bronze hair and flowery clothes. She gave a folder to the pretty receptionist, tutted at the rain and said, 'My, my, monsoon season's come to darkest Worcestershire!' I agreed it was chucking it down, and left with her quick. In case the other patients worked out why I was there. Down the corridor we went, past the signpost full of words like PAEDIATRICS and ULTRASCANS. (No ultranscan'd read my brain. I'd beat it by remembering every satellite in the solar system.) 'February's so gloomy in this part of the world,' said Mrs de Roo, 'don't you think? It's not so much a month as a twenty-eight-day-long Monday morning. You leave home in the dark and go home in the dark. On wet days like these, it's like living in a cave, behind a waterfall.'

I told Mrs de Roo how I'd heard Eskimo kids spend time under artificial sun-lamps to stop them getting scurvy, 'cause at the North Pole winter lasts for most of the year. I suggested Mrs de Roo should think about getting a sunbed.

Mrs de Roo answered, 'I shall think on.'

We passed a room where a howling baby'd just had an injection. In the next room a freckly girl Julia's age sat in a wheelchair. One of her legs wasn't there. She'd probably love to have my stammer if she could have her leg back, and I wondered if being happy's about other people's misery. That cuts both ways, mind. People'll look at me after tomorrow morning and think, Well, my life may be a swamp of shit but at least I'm not in Jason Taylor's shoes. At least I can talk.

February's Hangman's favourite month. Come summer he gets dozy and hibernates through to autumn, and I can speak a bit better. In fact after my first run of visits to Mrs de Roo five years ago, by the time my hayfever began everyone thought my stammer was cured. But come November Hangman wakes up again, sort of like John Barleycorn in reverse. By January he's his old self again, so back I come to Mrs de Roo. This year Hangman's worse than ever. Aunt Alice stayed with us two weeks ago and one night I was crossing the landing and I heard her say to Mum, 'Honestly, Helena, when are you going to do something about his stutter? It's social suicide! I never know whether to finish the sentence for him or just leave the poor boy dangling on the end of his rope.' (Eavesdropping's sort of thrilling 'cause you learn what people really think, but eavesdropping makes you miserable for exactly the same reason.) After Aunt Alice'd gone back to Richmond, Mum sat me down and said it mightn't do any harm to visit Mrs de Roo again. I said okay, 'cause actually I'd wanted to but I hadn't asked 'cause I was ashamed, and 'cause mentioning my stammer makes it realer.

Mrs de Roo's office smells of Nescafé. She drinks Nescafé Gold Blend non-stop. There're two ratty sofas, one yolky rug, a dragon's-egg paperweight, a Fisher-Price toy multi-storey car park and a giant Zulu mask from South Africa. Mrs de Roo was born in South Africa but one day she was told by the government to leave the country in twenty-four hours or she'd be thrown into prison. Not 'cause she'd done anything wrong, but because they do that in South Africa if you don't agree coloured people should be kept herded off in mud-and-straw huts in big reservations with no schools, no hospitals and no jobs. Julia says the police in South Africa don't always bother with prisons, and that often they throw you off a tall building and say you tried to escape. Mrs de Roo and her husband (who's an Indian brain surgeon) escaped to Rhodesia in a jeep but had to leave everything they owned behind. The government took the lot. (The Malvern Gazetteer interviewed her, that's how I know most of this.) South Africa's summer is our winter so their February is lovely and hot. Mrs de Roo's still got a slightly funny accent. Her 'yes' is a 'yis' and her 'get' is a 'git'.

'So, Jason,' she began today. 'How are things?'

Most people only want a 'Fine, thanks' when they ask a kid that, but Mrs de Roo actually means it. So I confessed to her about tomorrow's form assembly. Talking 'bout my stammer's nearly as embarrassing as stammering itself, but it's okay with her. Hangman knows he mustn't mess with Mrs de Roo so he acts like he's not there. Which is good, 'cause it proves I can speak like a normal person, but bad, 'cause how can Mrs de Roo ever defeat Hangman if she never even sees him properly?

Mrs de Roo asked if I'd spoken to Mr Kempsey about excusing me for a few weeks. I already had done, I told her, and this is what he'd said. 'We must all face our demons one day, Taylor, and for you, that time is nigh.' Form assemblies're read by students in alphabetical order. We've got to 'T' for 'Taylor' and as far as Mr Kempsey's concerned that's that.

Mrs de Roo made an I see noise.

Neither of us said anything for a moment.

‘Any headway with your diary, Jason?’

The diary’s a new idea prompted by Dad. Dad phoned Mrs de Roo to say that given my ‘annual tendency to relapse’, he thought extra ‘homework’ was appropriate. So Mrs de Roo suggested that I keep a diary. Just a line or two every day, where I write when, where and what word I stammered on, and how I felt. Week One looks like this:

| Date | place | Word | How I felt |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| 12 th Feb, 1982 | dining room | normally | Bad |
| 13th Feb, 1982 | school gym | Simon le bon | stupid |
| 14th Feb, 1982 | school bus | swimm- ing | bad and stupid |
| 15th Feb, 1982 | on telephone | Notting- ham | awful |
| 16th Feb, 1982 | Mr Rhy- mes- ads shop | newspaper | awful and bad |
| 17th Feb, 1982 | French lesson | Sur le Pont D'- Avignon | bad. |

‘More of a chart, then,’ Mrs de Roo said, ‘than a diary in the classical mode, as such?’ (Actually I wrote it last night. It’s not lies or anything, just truths I made up. If I wrote every time I had to dodge Hangman, the diary’d be as thick as the Yellow Pages.) ‘Most informative. Very neatly ruled, too.’ I asked if I should carry on with the diary next week. Mrs de Roo said she thought my father’d be disappointed if I didn’t, so maybe I should.

Then Mrs de Roo got out her Metro Gnome. Metro Gnomes’re upside-down pendulums without the clock part. They tock rhythms. They’re small, which could be why they’re called gnomes. Music students normally use them but speech therapists do too. You read aloud in time with its tocks, like this: here – comes – the – can – dle – to – take – you – to – bed, – here – comes – the – chop – per – to – chop – off – your – head. Today we read a stack of N-words from the dictionary, one by one. The Metro Gnome does make speaking easy, as easy as singing, but I can hardly carry one around with me, can I? Kids like Ross Wilcox’d say, ‘What’s this, then, Taylor?’, snap off its pendulum in a nanosecond, and say, ‘Shoddy workmanship, that.’

After the Metro Gnome I read aloud from a book Mrs de Roo keeps for me called Z for Zachariah. Z for Zachariah’s about a girl called Anne who lives in a valley with its own freak weather system that protects it after a nuclear war’s poisoned the rest of the country and killed everyone else off. For all Anne knows she’s the only person alive in the British Isles. As a book it’s utterly brill but a bit bleak. Maybe Mrs de Roo suggested I read this to make me feel luckier than Anne despite my stammer. I got a bit stuck on a couple of words but you’d not’ve noticed if you weren’t looking. I know Mrs de Roo was saying, See, you can read aloud without stammering. But there’s stuff not even speech therapists understand. Quite often, even in bad spells, Hangman’ll let me say whatever I want, even words beginning with dangerous letters. This (a) gives me hope I’m cured which Hangman can enjoy destroying later and (b) let’s me con other kids into thinking I’m normal while keeping alive and well the fear that my secret’ll be discovered.

There's more. I once wrote Hangman's Four Commandments.

1st commandment :-

Thou shalt hide from
speech therapists.

2nd commandment :-

Thou shalt strangle
Taylor, when he is nervous
about stammering.

3rd commandment :-

Thou shalt ambush
Taylor when he is not
nervous about stammering.

4th commandment

Once Taylor is 'Stutterboy'
in the eyes of the world
he is yours

When the session was over, Mrs de Roo asked me if I felt any more confident about my form assembly. She'd've liked me to say 'Sure!' but only if I meant it. I said, 'Not a lot, to be honest.' Then I asked if stammers're like zits that you grow out of, or if kids with stammers're more like toys that're wired wrong at the factory and stay busted all their lives. (You get stammering adults too. There's one on a BBC1 sitcom called Open All Hours on Sunday evenings where Ronnie Barker plays a shopkeeper who stutters so badly, so hilariously, that the audience pisses itself laughing. Even knowing about Open All Hours makes me shrivel up like a plastic wrapper in a fire.)

'Yis,' said Mrs de Roo. 'That's the question. My answer is, it depends. Speech therapy is as imperfect a science, Jason, as speaking is a complex one. There are seventy-two muscles involved in the production of human speech. The neural connections my brain is employing now, to say this sentence to you, number in the tens of millions. Little wonder one study put the percentage of people with some kind of speech disorder at twelve per cent. Don't put your faith in a miracle cure. In the vast majority of cases, progress doesn't come from trying to kill a speech defect. Try to will it out of existence, it'll just will itself back stronger. Right? No, it's a question – and this might sound nutty – of understanding it, of coming to a working accommodation with it, of respecting it, of not fearing it. Yis, it'll flare up from time to time, but if you know why it flares, you'll know how to douse what makes it flare up. Back in Durban I had a friend who'd once been an alcoholic. One day I asked him how he'd cured himself. My friend said he'd done no such thing. I said, "What do you mean? You haven't touched a drop in three years!" He said all he'd done was become a teetotal alcoholic. That's my goal. To help people change from being stammering stammerers into non-stammering stammerers.'

Mrs de Roo's no fool and all that makes sense.

But it's sod-all help for 2KM's form assembly tomorrow morning.

Dinner was steak-and-kidney pie. The steak bits're okay, but kidney makes me reach for the vomit bucket. I have to try to swallow the kidney bits whole. Smuggling bits into my pocket is too risky since Julia spotted me last time and grassed on me. Dad was telling Mum about a new trainee salesman called Danny Lawlor at the new Greenland superstore in Reading. ‘Fresh from some management course, and he’s Irish as Hurricane Higgins, but my word, that lad hasn’t kissed the Blarney Stone, he’s bitten off chunks of it. Talk about the gift of the gab! Craig Salt dropped by while I was there to instil some God-fearing discipline into the troops, but Danny had him eating out of his hand in five minutes flat. Executive material, is that young man. When Craig Salt gives me nationwide sales next year, I’m fast-tracking Danny Lawlor and frankly I don’t care whose nose I put out of joint.’

‘The Irish’ve always had to live by their wits,’ said Mum.

Dad didn’t remember it was Speech Therapy Day till Mum’d mentioned she’d written a ‘plumpish’ cheque for Lorenzo Hussingtree in Malvern Link. Dad asked what Mrs de Roo’d thought about his diary idea. Her comment that it was ‘most informative’ fuelled his good mood. “‘Informative’? Indispensable, more like! Smart-think Management Principles are applicable across the board. Like I told Danny Lawlor, any operator is only as good as his data. Without data, you’re the Titanic, crossing an Atlantic chock full of icebergs without radar. Result? Collision, disaster, goodnight.’

‘Wasn’t radar invented in the Second World War?’ Julia forked a lump of steak. ‘And didn’t the Titanic sink before the First?’

‘The principle, o daughter of mine, is a universal constant. If you don’t keep records, you can’t make progress assessments. True for retailers, true for educators, true for the military, true for any systems operator. One bright day in your brilliant career at the Old Bailey you’ll learn this the hard way and think, If only I’d listened to my dear wise father. How right he was.’

Julia snorted horsily, which she gets away with 'cause she's Julia. I can never tell Dad what I really think like that. I can feel the stuff I don't say rotting inside me like mildewy spuds in a sack. Stammerers can't win arguments 'cause once you stammer, H-h-hey p-p-presto, you've l-l-lost, S-s-st-st-utterboy! If I stammer with Dad, he gets that face he had when he got his Black and Decker Workmate home and found it was minus a crucial packet of screws. Hangman just loves that face.

After Julia and I'd done the washing up Mum and Dad sat in front of the telly watching a glittery new quiz show called Blankety Blank presented by Terry Wogan. Contestants have to guess a missing word from a sentence and if they guess the same as the panel of celebrities they win crap prizes like a mug tree with mugs.

Up in my room I started my homework on the feudal system for Mrs Coscombe. But then I got sucked in by a poem about a skater on a frozen lake who wants to know what it's like to be dead so much, he's persuaded himself that a drowned kid's talking to him. I typed it out on my Silver Reed Elan 20 Manual Typewriter. I love how it's got no number 1 so you use the letter 'l'.

My Silver Reed's probably what I'd save if our house ever caught fire, now my granddad's Omega Seamaster's busted. The worst thing in a locked house in a bad dream, that was.

So anyway, my alarm-radio suddenly said 21:15. I had less than twelve hours. Rain drummed on my window. The rhythms of Metro Gnomes're in rain and poems too, and breathing, not just tocks of clocks.

Julia's footsteps crossed my ceiling and went downstairs. She opened the living-room door and asked if she could phone Kate Alfrick about some economics homework. Dad said okay. Our phone's in the hallway to make it uncomfortable to use, so if I creep over the landing to my surveillance position I can catch just about everything.

'Yeah, yeah, I did get your Valentine's card, and very sweet it is too, but listen, you know why I'm calling! Did you pass?'

Pause.

'Just tell me, Ewan! Did you pass?'

Pause. (Who's Ewan?)

‘Excellent! Brilliant! Fantastic! I was going to chuck you if you’d failed, of course. Can’t have a boyfriend who can’t drive.’

(‘Boyfriend’? ‘Chuck’?) Muffled laughter plus pause.

‘No! No! He’s never!’

Pause.

Julia did the ohhh! moany noise she does when she’s mega-jealous. ‘God, why can’t I have a filthy-rich uncle who gives me sports cars? Can’t I have one of yours? Go on, you’ve got more than you need...’

Pause.

‘You bet. How about Saturday? Oh, you’ve got classes all morning, I keep forgetting...’

Saturday morning classes? This Ewan must be a Worcester Cathedral School kid. Posh.

‘...Russell and Dorrell’s café, then. One thirty. Kate’ll drive me in.’

A sly Julia laugh.

‘No, I certainly will not be bringing him. Thing spends his Saturdays skulking up trees or hiding down holes.’

The sound of the Nine o’Clock News filled the hallway as the living-room door opened. Julia switched to her Kate voice. ‘Got that bit, yeah, Kate, but I still can’t get my head round question nine. I’d better check your answers before the test. Okay...okay. Thanks. See you in the morning. G’night.’

‘Sort it out?’ Dad called from the kitchen.

‘Pretty much,’ said Julia, zipping up her pencil case.

Julia's an ace liar. She's applied to do law at university and she's got several offers of places already. (Lawyer-liar, liar-lawyer. Never noticed that before.) The idea of any boy snogging my sister makes me grab the vomit bucket but quite a few sixth-formers fancy her. I bet Ewan's one of these super-confident kids who wears Blue Stratos and winkle-pickers and hair like Nick Heyward from Haircut 100. I bet Ewan speaks in well-drilled sentences that march by perfectly, like my cousin Hugo. Speaking well is the same as commanding.

God knows what job I'm going to be able to do. Not a lawyer, that's for sure. You can't stammer in court. You can't stammer in a classroom, either. My students'd crucify me. There aren't many jobs where speaking isn't a part of it. I can't be a professional poet, 'cause Miss Lippetts said once nobody buys poetry. I could be a monk, but church is more boring than watching the test card. Mum made us go to Sunday school at St Gabriel's when we were smaller but it turned every Sunday morning into torture by boredom. Even Mum got bored after a few months. Being trapped in a monastery'd be murder. How about a lighthouse keeper? All those storms, sunsets and Dairylea sandwiches'd make you lonely in the end. But lonely is something I'd better get used to. What girl'd go out with a stammerer? Or even dance with one? The last song at the Black Swan Green village hall disco'd be over before I could spit out D-d-d-you want to d-d-d-d-d-dance. Or what if I stammered at my wedding and couldn't even say 'I do'?

'Were you listening in just now?'

Julia'd appeared, leaning on my door frame.

'What?'

'You heard me. Were you eavesdropping on my phone call just now?'

'What phone call?' My reply was too fast and too innocent.

'If you ask me,' my sister's glare made my face begin to smoke, 'a little privacy isn't too much to ask. If you had any friends to phone, Jason, I

wouldn't listen in on you. People who eavesdrop are such maggots.'

'I wasn't eavesdropping!' How whiney I sounded.

'So how come your door was closed three minutes ago, but now it's wide open?'

'I don't—' (Hangman seized 'know' so I had to abort the sentence, spazzishly.) 'What's it to you? The room felt stuffy.' (Hangman let 'stuffy' go unchallenged.) 'I went to the bog. A draught opened it.'

'A draught? Sure, there's a hurricane blowing over the landing. I can hardly stand upright.'

'I wasn't listening in on you!'

Julia said nothing for long enough to tell me she knew I was bullshitting.
'Who said you could borrow Abbey Road?'

Her LP was by my crappy record player. 'You hardly listen to it.'

'Even if that were true, it wouldn't make it your property. You never wear Granddad's watch. Does that make it my property?' She entered my room to get her record, stepping over my Adidas bag. Julia glanced at my typewriter. Lurching with shame, I hid my poem with my body. 'So you agree,' her real meaning as subtle as nutcrackers, 'a little privacy isn't too much to ask? And if this record has a single scratch on it, you're dead.'

Through the ceiling's coming not Abbey Road but 'The Man with the Child in His Eyes' by Kate Bush. Julia only plays 'The Man with the Child in His Eyes' when she's hyper-emotional or when she's got her period. Life must be pretty brill for Julia. She's eighteen, she's leaving Black Swan Green in a few months, she's got a boyfriend with a sports car, she gets twice as much pocket money as me, and she can make other people do whatever she wants with words.

Just words.

Julia's just put on 'Songbird' by Fleetwood Mac.



Dad gets up before it's light on Wednesdays 'cause he's got to drive to Oxford for a midweek meeting at Greenland HQ. The garage is below my bedroom, so I hear his Rover 3500 growl into life. If it's raining like this morning its tyres shssssssh on the puddly drive and the rain shplatterdrangs on the swivelled-up garage door. My radio-alarm glowed 06:35 in numerals of Mekon green; 150 minutes of life left, that was all. I could already see the rows and columns of faces in my class, like a screen of Space Invaders. Guffawing, puzzled, appalled, pitying. Who decides which defects are funny and which ones are tragic? Nobody laughs at blind people or makes iron lung jokes.

If God made each minute last six months I'd be middle aged by breakfast and dead by the time I got on the school bus. I could sleep for ever. I tried to push away what was in store by lying back and imagining the ceiling was the unmapped surface of a G-class planet orbiting Alpha Centauri. Nobody was there. I'd never have to say a word.

‘Jason! Up time!’ yelled Mum from downstairs. I’d dreamed I’d woken in a gas-blue wood and’d found my granddad’s Omega, in one piece, in fiery crocuses. Then came running feet and the thought it was a Spook running home to St Gabriel’s graveyard. Mum yelled again, ‘Jason!’, and I saw the time: 07:41.

I mustered a muzzy ‘okay!’ and ordered my legs out of bed so the rest of me’d have to follow. The bathroom mirror, worse luck, showed no signs of leprosy. I thought about pressing a hot flannel to my forehead, drying it and then complaining to Mum of a temperature, but she’s not that easy to fool. My lucky red underpants were in the wash so I settled for my banana-yellow ones. It’s not a PE day so it won’t matter. Downstairs, Mum was watching the new breakfast TV on BBC1 and Julia was slicing a banana into her Alpen.

‘Morning,’ I said. ‘What’s that magazine?’

Julia held up the front cover of Face. ‘If you touch it when I’m gone I’ll strangle you.’

I should’ve been born, hissed Unborn Twin, not you, you cow.

‘Is that expression supposed to mean something?’ Julia hadn’t forgotten last night. ‘You look like you’re wetting yourself.’

I could’ve retaliated by asking Julia if she’d strangle Ewan if he touched her Face, but that’d’ve been admitting I was an eavesdropping maggot. My Weetabix tasted like balsa-wood. After I’d finished, I cleaned my teeth, put today’s books in my Adidas bag and Bic biros in my pencil case. Julia’d already gone. She goes to the sixth-form site of our school with Kate Alfrick, who’s already passed her driving test.

Mum was on the phone telling Aunt Alice about the new bathroom. ‘Hang on, Alice.’ Mum cupped the phone. ‘Have you got your lunch money?’

I nodded. I decided to tell her about the form assembly. ‘Mum, there’s—’

Hangman was blocking ‘something’.

‘Hurry up, Jason! You’ll miss the bus!’

Outside was blowy and wet, like a rain machine was aimed over Black Swan Green. Kingfisher Meadows was all rain-stained walls, dripping bird tables, wet gnomes, swilling ponds and shiny rockeries. A moon-grey cat watched me from Mr Castle's dry porch. Wished there was some way a boy could turn into a cat. I passed the bridleway stile. If I was Grant Burch or Ross Wilcox or any of the council house kids from down Wellington End, I'd just skive off and hop over that stile and follow the bridleway to wherever it went. Even see if it leads to the lost tunnel under the Malvern Hills. But kids like me just can't. Mr Kempsey'd notice straight off that I was absent on my dreaded form-assembly day. Mum'd be phoned by morning break. Mr Nixon'd get involved. Dad'd be called out of his Wednesday meeting. Truant officers and their sniffer dogs'd be put on my trail. I'd get captured, interrogated, skinned alive, and Mr Kempsey'd still make me read a passage from Plain Prayers for a Complicated World.

Once you think about the consequences, you've had it.

By the Black Swan girls were clustered under umbrellas. Boys can't use umbrellas 'cause they're gay. ('Cept for Grant Burch, that is, who stays dry by getting his servant Philip Phelps to bring a big golfing umbrella.) My duffel coat keeps my top half dryish but at the corner of the main road a Vauxhall Chevette'd splashed a big puddle and soaked my shins. My socks were gritty and damp. Pete Redmarley and Gilbert Swinyard and Nick Yew and Ross Wilcox and that lot were having a puddle fight, but just as I got there the Noddy-eyed school bus pulled up. Norman Bates looked at us from behind his steering wheel like a sleepless slaughterman at a sty of ripe pigs. We got on board and the door hissed shut. My Casio said 8.35.

On rainy mornings the school bus stinks of boys, burps and ashtrays. The front rows get taken by girls who get on at Guarlford and Blackmore End and who just talk about homework. The hardest kids go straight to the back, but even kids like Pete Redmarley and Gilbert Swinyard behave themselves when Norman Bates's driving. Norman Bates is one of those cracked stone men you shouldn't mess with. One time, Pluto Noak opened the emergency exit for a doss. Norman Bates went to the back, grabbed him, dragged him

to the front, and literally chucked him off the bus. Pluto Noak cried up from his ditch, ‘I’m taking you to court, I am! You bust me flamin’ arm!’

Norman Bates’s reply was to remove the cigarette from the corner of his mouth, lean down the steps of his bus, stick out his tongue like a Maori, and stub out the still-glowing cigarette, slow and deliberate, actually on his tongue. We heard the hiss. The man flicked the stub at the boy in the ditch.

Then Norman Bates sat down and drove off.

Nobody’s touched the fire door on his bus since that day.

Dean Moran got on at the Drugger's End stop, just at the edge of the village. 'Hey, Dean,' I said, 'sit here if you want.' Moran was so pleased I'd used his real name in front of everyone he grinned and plomped right down. 'Jesus,' said Moran. 'If it keeps pissing it down like this the Severn'll burst its banks down at Upton by home time. And Worcester. And Tewkesbury.'

'Definitely.' I was being friendly for my benefit as much as his. On the bus home tonight I'd be lucky if the Invisible Man'd want to sit by J-j-j-aslon T-t-taylor the ssss-ssschool ssss-ssstutterboy. Moran and me played Connect 4 on the steamed-up windows. Moran'd won one game before we even got to Welland Cross. Moran's in Miss Wyche's form at school, 2W. 2W's the next-to-bottom class. But Moran's no duffer, not really. It's just that everyone'd give him a hard time if his marks were too good.

A black horse stood in a marshy field looking miserable. But not as miserable as I was going to be in twenty-one minutes and counting.

The heater under our seat'd melted my school trousers on to my shins and someone dropped an egg fart. Gilbert Swinyard roared, 'Squelch's dropped a gas bomb!' Squelch grinned his brown grin, blew his nose on a Monster Munch packet and chucked it. Crisp bags don't fly far and it just landed on Robin South in the row behind.

Before I knew it, the bus swung into our school and we all piled off. On wet days we wait for the bell in the main hall instead of the playground. School was all skiddy floors this morning, damp steaming anoraks, teachers telling kids off for screaming and first-years playing illegal tag in the corridors and third-year girls trawling the corridors with linked arms singing a song by the Pretenders. The clock by the tunnel to the staffroom where kids are made to stand as a punishment through their lunch-times told me I had eight minutes to live.

‘Ah, Taylor, splendid.’ Mr Kempsey pinched my earlobe. ‘The very pupil whom I seek. Follow. I wish to deposit words into your auditory organ.’ My form teacher led me down the gloomy passageway leading to the staffroom. The staffroom’s like God. You can’t see it and live. It was ahead, ajar, and cigarette smoke billowed out like fog in Jack the Ripper’s London. But we turned off and stepped into the stationery storeroom. The stationery storeroom’s sort of a holding cell for kids in the shit. I was wondering what I’d done. ‘Five minutes ago,’ Mr Kempsey said, ‘a telephone call was channelled to myself. This telephone call was regarding Jason Taylor. From a well-wisher.’

You just have to wait with Mr Kempsey.

‘Petitioning me to grant a last-minute act of clemency.’

Mr Nixon the headmaster dashed past the doorway, emitting fumes of anger and tweed.

‘Sir?’

Mr Kempsey grimaced at my dim-wittedness. ‘Am I to understand that you anticipate this morning’s form assembly with a level of trepidation one might describe as “debilitating dread”?’

I sensed Mrs de Roo’s white magic but didn’t dare hope it might save me.
‘Yes, sir.’

‘Yes, Taylor. It seems your dedicated speech therapist holds the opinion that a postponement of this morning’s trial-by-ordeal may be conducive to a longer-term level of self-confidence vis-à-vis the Arts of Rhetoric and Public Speaking. Do you second this motion, Taylor?’

I knew what he’d said but he was expecting me to act confused. ‘Sir?’

‘Do you or don’t you wish to be excused this morning’s reading?’

I said, ‘Very much, sir, yes.’

Mr Kempsey squished his mouth. People always think that not stammering is about jumping in at deep ends, about baptisms of fire. People see stammerers on TV who’re forced, one magic day, to go on stage in front of a thousand people and lo and behold a perfect voice flows out. See, everyone smiles, he had it in him all along! All he needed was a friendly push! Now he’s cured. But that’s such utter bollocks. If it ever actually happens it’s just Hangman obeying the First Commandment. Just go back and check up on that ‘cured’ stammerer one week later. You’ll see. The truth is, deep ends cause drowning. Baptisms of fire cause third-degree burns. ‘You can’t turn tail at the prospect of public speaking your whole life through, Taylor.’

Maggot said, Want to bet?

‘I know, sir. That’s why I’m doing my best to master it. With Mrs de Roo’s help.’

Mr Kempsey didn’t give in right away, but I sensed I was in the clear. ‘Very well. But I had you down as having more pluck than this, Taylor. I can only conclude that I had you down wrongly.’

I watched him go.

If I was the pope I’d’ve made Mrs de Roo a saint. On the spot.

Mr Kempsey's reading from Plain Prayers for a Complicated World was about how in life it can rain for forty days and forty nights but God made a promise to humanity that one day a rainbow will appear. (Julia says it's absurd how in 1982 Bible stories're still being taught like they're historical fact.) Then we sang the hymn that goes All good gifts around us are sent from Heaven above, so thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for a-a-all His love. I thought that was that, but after Mr Kempsey'd read the notices and orders from Mr Nixon, Gary Drake put up his hand. 'Excuse me, sir, but I thought it was Jason Taylor's turn to read the assembly today. I was really looking forward to hearing him. Is he going to be doing it next week instead?'

Every neck in our classroom swivelled its head my way.

Sweat sprang out in fifty places, all over me. I just stared at the chalk nebulae on the blackboard.

After a few seconds that felt like a few hours Mr Kempsey said, 'Your spirited defence of established protocol is commendable, Drake, and, no doubt, altruistic. However, I possess reliable intelligence that Taylor's vocal apparati are in an unseaworthy condition. Thus, your classmate is excused on quasi-medical grounds.'

'So will he be doing it next week instead, sir?'

'The alphabet marches on regardless of human frailties, Drake. Next week is T-for-Michelle Tirley, and Ours Is Not to Wonder Why.'

'Doesn't seem very fair, sir, does it?'

What've I ever done to Gary Drake?

'Life is regularly unfair, Drake,' Mr Kempsey locked the piano, 'despite our best endeavours, and we must face its challenges as they arise. The sooner you learn that,' our teacher shot a stare not at Gary Drake but straight at me, 'the better.'

Wednesday kicks off with double maths with Mr Inkberrow. Double maths is just about the worst lesson of the week. Normally I sit next to Alastair Nurton in maths but this morning Alastair Nurton was sitting next to David Ockeridge. The only free seat was next to Carl Norrest, right in front of Mr Inkberrow's desk, so I had to sit there. It was raining so hard the farms and fields outside were dissolving in whites. Mr Inkberrow frisbeed us back our exercise books from last week and started the lesson by asking a few dead easy questions to 'engage the brain'.

'Taylor!' He'd caught me avoiding his eye.

'Yes, sir?'

'In need of a little focusing, hmm? If a is eleven and b is nine and x is the product of a times b, what is the value of x?'

The answer's a piece of piss, it's ninety-nine.

But 'ninety-nine' is a double-N word. A double-stammer. Hangman wanted revenge for my stay of execution. He'd slid his fingers into my tongue and was clasping my throat and pinching the veins that take oxygen to my brain. When Hangman's like that I'd look a total flid if I tried to spit the word out. 'A hundred and one, sir?'

The brighter kids in the class groaned.

Gary Drake did this loud croak. 'The boy's a genius!'

Mr Inkberrow takes off his glasses, huffs them and polishes them with the fat end of his tie. 'Nine times eleven equals "a hundred and one", you say, hmm? Let me ask you a follow-up question, Taylor. Why do we bother getting up in the morning? Can you tell me that, hmm? Why oh why oh why do we flipping bother?'

Relatives

‘They’re here!’ I yelled, as Uncle Brian’s white Ford Granada Ghia cruised up Kingfisher Meadows. Julia’s door closed as if to say, Big deal, but a volley of getting-ready noises banged downstairs. I’d already taken down my map of Middle Earth and hidden away my globe and anything else Hugo might think babyish, so I just stayed sat on my window sill. Last night’s gale’d sounded like King Kong trying to yank our roof off and was only just dying down. Across the road, Mr Woolmere was hauling off bits of his blown-down fence. Uncle Brian turned into our drive and the Granada came to a rest alongside Mum’s Datsun Cherry. First out was Aunt Alice, Mum’s sister. Then my three Lamb cousins piled out of the back. First came Alex in a THE SCORPIONS LIVE IN 1981 T-shirt and a Björn Borg headband. Alex is seventeen but he’s got bubonic zits and his body’s three sizes too large for him. Next was Nigel the Squirt, the youngest, busy solving a Rubik’s cube at high speed. Last came Hugo.

Hugo fits his body like a glove. He’s two years older than me. ‘Hugo’ would be a cursed name for most kids but on Hugo it’s a halo. (Plus, the Lambs go to an independent school in Richmond where you get picked on not if you’re posh but if you’re not posh enough.) Hugo wore a black zip-up top with no hood and no logo, button-fly Levi jeans, pixie boots and one of those woven wristbands you wear to prove you’re not a virgin. Luck loves Hugo. When Alex, Nigel and me are still swapping Euston Road for Old Kent Road plus £300 and praying to scoop the kitty from Free Parking, Hugo’s already got hotels on Mayfair and Park Lane.

‘You made it!’ Mum crossed the driveway and hugged Aunt Alice.

I opened the window a crack to hear better.

Meanwhile Dad’d come round from the greenhouse all togged out in his gardening gear. ‘Blustery weather you’ve brought us, Brian!’

Uncle Brian'd hauled himself out of his car and did a jokey step-back-in-amazement when he saw Dad. ‘Well, catch a load of the intrepid horticulturist!’

Dad wagged his trowel. ‘This blooming wind’s flattened my daffodils! We have “our man” do the lion’s share in the garden, but he can’t come until Tuesday, and as the old Chinese proverb—’

‘Mr Broadwas is one of those priceless village characters,’ said Mum, ‘who’s worth twice what we pay him because he has to undo all the damage Michael wreaks.’

‘—as the ancient Chinese proverb goes, “Wise Man Say, to Be Happy for Week, Mally Wife. To Be Happy for Month, Sraughtter Pig. To Be Happy for Rifetime, Prant Garden”. Rather amusing, eh?’

Uncle Brian pretended to find it rather amusing.

‘When Michael heard his ancient Chinese proverb on Gardeners’ Question Time the other day,’ Mum remarked, ‘the pig came before the wife. But look at you three boys! You’ve shot up again! Whatever are you putting on their corn flakes, Alice? Whatever it is, I should put some on Jason’s.’

That was a kick in the ribs.

‘Well,’ Dad said, ‘let’s all get inside before we get blown away.’

Hugo received my telepathic signal and looked up at me.

I half waved.

The drinks cabinet is only opened when visitors and relatives come. It smells of varnish and sherry vapours. (Once, when everyone was out, I tried some sherry. Syrupy Domestos, it tastes of.) Mum had me haul a dining-room chair into the living room 'cause there weren't enough. These chairs weigh a ton and it banged my shin something chronic but I acted like it was no sweat. Nigel flumped on the bean-bag and Alex got one of the armchairs. Alex tapped out a drumbeat on the arm-rest. Hugo just sat on the rug, cross-legged, saying, 'I'm fine here, Aunt Helena, thanks,' when Mum told me off for not bringing enough chairs. Julia still hadn't appeared. 'I'll be down in a minute!' she'd hollered, twenty hours ago.

As usual, Dad and Uncle Brian kicked off with an argument about the route from Richmond to Worcestershire. (Each was wearing the golf jersey the other'd given him for Christmas.) Dad thought the A40 would've clipped twenty minutes off the A419 route. Uncle Brian disagreed. Then Uncle Brian said when they left later today he planned to drive to Bath via Cirencester and the A417 and Dad's face lit up with horror. 'The A417? Crossing the Cotswolds on a bank holiday? Brian, it'll be living hell!'

Mum said, 'I'm sure Brian knows what he's doing, Michael.'

'The A417? Purgatory!' Dad was already leafing through his AA Book of British Towns and Uncle Brian'd sent Mum a look that said, If it makes the old boy happy, let him. (That look got on my wick.) 'We have these innovations in this country, Brian, commonly known as "motorways"... here, you need the M5 down to Junction Fifteen...' Dad stabbed the map. 'Here! Then just head east. No need to get bogged down in Bristol. M4 to Junction Eighteen, then the A46 to Bath. Bob's your uncle.'

'Last time we went to see Don and Drucilla,' Uncle Brian didn't look at the AA Book of British Towns, 'we did that. Took the M4 north of Bristol. Guess what. Stuck, bumper to bumper, for two hours! Weren't we, Alice?'

'It certainly was quite a long time.'

'Two hours, Alice.'

‘But,’ Dad countered, ‘that was because you got caught in a contra-flow when the new lane was being built. You’ll zip along the M4 today. Clean as a whistle. Guarantee it.’

‘Thank you, Michael,’ Uncle Brian said mewily, ‘but I’m not really a great “fan” of motorway driving.’

‘Well, Brian,’ Dad clomped shut his AA Book of British Towns, ‘if you’re a “fan” of crawling along at thirty in a convoy of geriatric caravanners, the A417 to Cirencester is the route for you.’

‘Come and give us a hand, please, Jason.’

‘Give us a hand’ meant ‘get everything’. Mum was showing Aunt Alice her recently souped-up kitchen. Meaty smells leaked out of the oven. Aunt Alice stroked the new tiles, saying ‘exquisite!’ while Mum poured three glasses of Coke for Alex, Nigel and me. Hugo’d asked for a glass of cold water. Then I poured a bag of Twiglets into a dish. (Twiglets’re snacks that adults think kids like but they taste of burnt matches dipped in Marmite.) Then I put everything on a tray in the hatch, go round and carry it to the coffee table. Dead unfair I had to do everything. If it’d been me and not Julia who was still in my room, they’d’ve sent in a SWAT squad by now.

‘The memsahibs have got you well trained, I see,’ said Uncle Brian. I pretended to know what a memsahib was.

‘Brian?’ Dad waved the decanter at him. ‘Drop more sherry?’

‘Why the heck not, Michael? Why the heck not?’

Alex grunted as I gave him his Coke. He scooped up a fistful of Twiglets.

Nigel did this perky ‘Thanks very much!’ and grabbed the Twiglets too.

Hugo said, ‘Cheers, Jace’ for the water and ‘No thanks’ to the Twiglets.

Uncle Brian and Dad’d left Driving and moved on to the Recession.

‘No, Michael,’ Uncle Brian said, ‘you’re mistaken, for once in your life. The accountancy game’s more or less immune to economic doldrums.’

‘But you can’t tell me your client base isn’t feeling the pinch?’

‘The “pinch”? Blimey O’Riley, Michael, they’re taking it in the teeth! Bankruptcies and foreclosures, morning, noon and night! We’re rushed off our bloody feet, pardon my French. Swamped! Tell you, I’m grateful to that woman in Downing Street for this financial – what’s that latest fad? –

anorexia. Us number-crunchers are making a killing! And as partners' bonuses are profit related, yours truly is sitting rather pretty.'

'Bankrupts,' Dad prodded, 'are hardly repeat customers.'

'But with a never-ending supply,' Uncle Brian glugged his sherry, 'who gives a tinker's cuss? No, no, it's you shop folk that my heart goes out to. This recession'll bleed the high street dry before it's finished. Quote me on that.'

I think not, said Dad's wagging finger 'The hallmark of switched-on management is success in the lean years, not the years of plenty. Unemployment may be up to three million, but Greenland took on ten management trainees this quarter. Customers want quality food at bulk prices.'

'Relax, Michael,' Uncle Brian did a jokey surrender, 'you're not at a seaside sales conference now. But I think you've got your head in the sand. Even Tories are talking about "tightening belts"...Unions dead on their feet, not that that's a bad thing in my book. But we've got British Leyland haemorrhaging jobs...the docks dwindling away...British Steel imploding...Everyone ordering ships from South bloody Korea, wherever that is, instead of the Tyne and the Clyde...Comrade Scargill threatening revolution...it's difficult to see how it can't have a knock-on effect on frozen crispy pancakes and fish fingers, in the long run. Alice and I do worry, you know.'

'Well,' Dad leant back, 'it's very good of you and Alice to worry, Brian, but the retailing sector is holding its own and Greenland is robust.'

'Very glad to hear it, Michael. Very glad indeed.'

(So was I. Gavin Coley's dad was laid off by Metalbox in Tewkesbury. His birthday at Alton Towers was cancelled, Gavin Coley's eyes sunk into his skull a few millimetres and a year later his parents got divorced. Kelly Moran told me his dad's still on the dole.)

Hugo wore a thin leather cord around his neck. I wanted one.

When the Lambs visit, salt and pepper magically turn into ‘the condiments’. Dinner was prawn cocktails in wine glasses for starters, lamb chops with chef’s hats with Duchesse potatoes and braised celery for main, and a Baked Alaska for ‘dessert’, not ‘afters’. We use the mother-of-pearl napkin rings. (Dad’s dad brought them back from Burma on the same voyage he got the Omega Seamaster I smashed in January.) Before starting the starters, Uncle Brian opened the wine he’d brought. Julia and Alex got a whole glass, Hugo and me just half, ‘and a whistle-wetter for you, Nigel.’

Aunt Alice did her usual toast, ‘To the Taylor and Lamb dynasties!’

Uncle Brian did his usual ‘Here’s looking at you, kid!’

Dad pretended to find that rather amusing.

We all clinked glasses (except Alex) and took a sip.

Dad is guaranteed to hold his wineglass up to the light and say, ‘Very easy to drink!’ He didn’t let us down today. Mum shot him a look, but Dad never notices. ‘I’ll say this much for you, Brian. You can’t half choose a decent plonk.’

‘Fabulous to earn your stamp of approval, Michael. Treated myself to a crate of the stuff. Comes from a vineyard near that charming cottage we rented in the lakes last year.’

‘Wine? The Lake District? Cumbria? Oh, I think you’ll find you’re mistaken there, Brian.’

‘No, no, Michael, not the English lakes, the Italian lakes. Lombardy.’ Uncle Brian whirlpooled his wine round his glass, snuftered it and glugged it back. ‘Nineteen seventy-three. Blackberryesque, melony, oaky. I concur with your expert judgement, though, Michael. Not a bad little vintage.’

‘Well,’ said Mum, ‘dig in, everyone!’

After the first round of ‘delicious!’es Aunt Alice said, ‘It’s been all go at school this term, hasn’t it, boys? Nigel’s the captain of the chess club.’

‘President,’ said Nigel, ‘actually.’

‘Beg pudding! Nigel’s the president of the chess club. And Alex is doing incredible things with the school computer, aren’t you, Alex? I can’t even set the video recordery doo-dah, but—’

‘Alex’s streets ahead of his teachers,’ said Uncle Brian, ‘truth be told. What is it you’re doing with it, Alex?’

‘FORTRAN. BASIC.’ Alex spoke like it hurt him. ‘PASCAL. Z-80 Code.’

‘You must be ever so intelligent,’ said Julia, so brightly I couldn’t tell if she’d said it sarkily or not.

‘Oh, you bet Alex is intelligent,’ said Hugo. ‘The brain of Alexander Lamb is the final frontier of British science.’

Alex glared at his brother.

‘There’s a real future in computering.’ Dad loaded his spoon with prawns. ‘Technology, design, electric cars. That’s what schools should be teaching. Not all this “wandered lonely as a cloud” guff. Like I was telling Craig Salt – he’s our MD at Greenland – just the other—’

‘Couldn’t agree with you more, Michael,’ Uncle Brian made a face like an evil mastermind announcing his plan for world domination, ‘which is why Alex is getting a hot-off-the-press twenty-pound note for every grade A this year, and a ten-pound note for every B – to buy his very own IBM.’ (My jealousy throbbed like toothache. Dad says paying your kids to study is ‘derelict’.) ‘Nothing beats the profit motive, right?’

Mum stepped in. ‘And how about you, Hugo?’

At last I could study Hugo without pretending not to.

‘Mainly,’ Hugo took a sip of water, ‘I’ve had some lucky races in the canoeing team, Aunt Helena.’

‘Hugo,’ Uncle Brian burped, ‘has showered himself in glory! By rights he should be the head honcho oarsman chappie, but some stuffed fat-arsed governor – oops, pardon my French – who owns half of Lloyd’s Insurance threatened to kick up a stink if his own Little Lord Herbert Bonks wasn’t appointed. What’s that child’s name again, Hugo?’

‘You might mean Dominic Fitzsimmons, Dad.’

““Dominic Fitzsimmons”! Couldn’t make it up, could you?”

I prayed the spotlight’d swivel its gaze towards Julia. I prayed Mum wouldn’t mention the poetry prize, not in front of Hugo.

‘Jason won the Hereford and Worcester County Libraries Poetry Prize,’ said Mum. ‘Didn’t you, Jason?’

‘I had to write it.’ Shame boiled my earlobes and there was nowhere to look but at my food. ‘In English. I didn’t’ (I tested the word know a couple of times but saw I was going to stammer spastically on it) ‘I didn’t realize Miss Lippetts was even going to enter it.’

‘Don’t hide your light under a bushel!’ cried Aunt Alice.

‘Jason won a splendid dictionary,’ said Mum, ‘didn’t you, Jason?’

Alex the Git fired his sarcasm below adult radar. ‘I’d really like to hear your poem, Jason.’

‘Can’t. Don’t have my exercise book.’

‘What a pity.’

‘The Malvern Gazetteer printed the winning entries,’ said Mum. ‘Alongside Jason’s mug-shot, in fact! We can dig it out after dinner.’

(Even the memory was a torture. They sent a photographer to school and made me pose in the library reading a book like a complete gaylord.)

‘Poets,’ Uncle Brian smacked his lips, ‘so I’ve heard tell, catch naughty diseases from Parisian ladies of ill repute and die in draughty gavottes by the Seine. Quite a career plan, eh, Mike?’

‘Wonderful prawns, Helena,’ Aunt Alice said.

Dad said, ‘Frozen, from Greenland in Worcester.’

‘Fresh, Michael. From the fishmonger’s.’

‘Oh. Didn’t know there were still any fishmongers left.’

Alex dug up the poetry prize again. ‘At least tell us what your poem was about, Jason. The blossoms of spring? Or was it a love poem?’

‘Can’t see you getting much out of it, Alex,’ said Julia. ‘Jason’s work lacks the subtlety and maturity of The Scorpions.’

Hugo spluttered, to niggle Alex. And to tell me whose side he was on. I could’ve kissed Julia out of sheer gratitude. Almost.

‘Wasn’t that funny,’ Alex muttered at Hugo.

‘Don’t sulk, Alex. It ruins your good looks.’

‘Boys,’ warned Aunt Alice.

The posh gravy boat was passed around the table. Between my creamed potatoes and my miniature Yorkshire puds I created a Mediterranean of gravy. Gibraltar was the tip of a carrot. ‘Dig in!’ said Mum.

Aunt Alice was the first to say, ‘Divine chops, Helena.’

Uncle Brian did a crap Italian accent. ‘Dey melt-a in da mouth!’

Nigel grinned adoringly at his dad.

‘The secret’s in the marinade,’ Mum said to Aunt Alice. ‘I’ll let you have the recipe afterwards.’

‘Oh, but Helena, I’m not leaving without it!’

‘A smidgen more wine, Michael?’ Uncle Brian topped up Dad’s glass (from the second bottle) before Dad could answer, then his own. ‘Don’t mind if I do, Michael, thanks. Here’s looking at you, kid! So Helena, I see your mobile pagoda hasn’t gone up to the great Oriental junkyard in the sky yet?’

Mum put on her polite puzzled face.

‘Your Datsun, Helena! If you weren’t such a wonderful cook it’d be difficult to forgive you for breaking the First Law of Automobiles. Don’t trust a Jap or the tat he churns out. The Germans’ve got the right idea for once. Seen the new Volkswagen adverts? There’s this pint-sized Nip, running round trying to find the new VW Golf, then it drops from the ceiling and flattens him! Wet myself first time I saw it, didn’t I, Alice?’

‘Isn’t your camera,’ Julia wiped her mouth with her napkin, ‘a Nikon, Uncle Brian?’

Hugo said, ‘Nothing wrong with Japanese hi-fi technology, either.’

‘Or computer chips,’ added Nigel.

So I said, ‘Their motorbikes are pretty classic as well.’

Uncle Brian did this disbelieving shrug. ‘Precisely my point, boys and girls! Japs’ll take everyone else’s technology, shrink it down to their own size, and then sell it back to the rest of the world, right, Mike? Mike? You’re with me on this one, at least? What do you expect from the only Axis power that never apologized for the war! They got away with it. Scot-free.’

‘Two hundred thousand civilians killed by atom bombs,’ said Julia, ‘and two million more, incinerated by fire-bombs, is hardly what I would call “scot-free”.’

‘But the fact of the matter is’ (Uncle Brian doesn’t hear what he doesn’t want to) ‘the Japs are still fighting the war. They own Wall Street. London’s next. Walking from the Barbican to my office, you’d need...twenty pairs of hands to count all the Fu Manchu look-alikes you pass by. Listen to this, Helena. My secretary bought herself one of those...whateverthehelltheycall’ems...y’know, those motorised rickshaws...a Honda Civic. That’s it. A turd-brown Honda Civic. She drove it out of the showroom and at the very first roundabout – I jest not – it’s exhaust dropped – clean – off. There’s your reason why they’re so competitive. They make tat. See? Can’t have it all in this life. Not without picking up a nasty fungal infection, anyway, eh, Mike?’

‘Pass me the condiments, please, Julia,’ Dad said to Julia.

Hugo and I caught each other’s eye and for one moment we were alone in a roomful of waxworks.

‘My Datsun,’ Mum offered some braised celery to Aunt Alice who made a no thanks gesture, ‘passed its MOT with flying colours last week.’

‘Don’t tell me,’ Uncle Brain sniffed, ‘you got it MOT-ed at the very same place that sold you your mobile pagoda in the first place?’

‘Why ever shouldn’t I?’

‘Ah, Helena.’ Uncle Brian shook his head.

‘I’m not quite seeing your point, Brian.’

‘Helena, Helena, Helena.’

Hugo asked for ‘just a sliver’ of Baked Alaska, so Mum cut him a wedge as big as Dad’s. ‘You’re a growing lad, for heaven’s sakes!’ (I filed the tactic away for future use.) ‘Dig in, everyone, before the ice cream melts.’

After the first spoonful, Aunt Alice said, ‘Out of this world!'

Dad said, ‘Very nice, Helena.’

‘Mike,’ Uncle Brian said, ‘you’re not going to let this bottle languish here half drunk now, are you?’ He tipped a fat glug into Dad’s glass, then his own, then raised his glass to my sister. “Here’s looking at you, kid!” But I’m still at a loss to understand why a young lady of your obvious talents shouldn’t be aiming for the Big Two. At Richmond Prep, I jest not, it’s Oxford this and Cambridge that, morning, noon and night, isn’t it, Alex?’

Alex raised his head ten degrees for a quarter-second to say yes.

‘Morning, noon and night,’ said Hugo, dead seriously.

‘Our careers adviser,’ Julia spooned a dribble of ice cream before it got to the tablecloth, ‘Mr Williams, has a friend in the radical bar in London, who says that if I want to specialize in environmental law then Edinburgh or Durham are really the places to—’

‘Then I’m sorry,’ Uncle Brian judo-chopped the air, ‘sorry, sorry, sorry, but Mr Williams – a closet Welshman, doubtless – Mr Williams should be tarred, feathered, tied to a mule and sent back to Haverfordwest! It’s not what you learn at university, it’s Uncle Brian was steamy red now ‘it’s who you network with! Only at Oxbridge can you network with tomorrow’s elite! I jest not, with the right college tie I’d’ve got made partner ten years ago! Mike...Helena! Surely you’re not going to stand idly by while your first-born squanders herself at the University of Nowhereshire?’

Annoyance darkened Julia’s face.

(I usually retreat to somewhere safe at this point.)

Mum said, ‘Edinburgh and Durham have good reputations.’

‘Doubtless, doubtless, but what you’ve got to remember is,’ Uncle Brian was now almost shrieking, ““Are they the best on the market?”” and the answer is ““Are they heck!”” Blimey O’Riley, this, this, is precisely the problem with comprehensive schools. Fabulous for little Jack and Jill Mediocrity, but do they push the brightest and ablest? Do they heck! For those teaching unions, “brighter” and “abler” are dirty words.’

Aunt Alice put her hand on Brian’s arm. ‘Brian, I think—’

‘I refuse to be “Brianned” when our only niece’s future is at stake! If my concern makes me a snob, then bugger it and ’scuse my French, I’ll be the bloodiest snob I know and wear that badge with pride! Why anyone with the brains for Oxbridge would set their sights on Jockland is simply beyond my understanding.’ Uncle Brian emptied his glass in one urgent swallow. ‘Unless perhaps—’ My uncle’s face turned from outraged to pervy in three seconds. ‘Ah, yes – unless there’s a young Scottish stallion with a hairy sporran you’re not confessing to anyone about, Julia, eh? Eh, Mike, eh? Eh, Helena? Thought of that, eh?’

‘Brian—’

‘Don’t worry, Aunt Alice.’ Julia smiled. ‘Uncle Brian knows I’d rather be involved in a multiple car crash than discuss my private life with him. I intend to study law in Edinburgh, and all the Brian Lambs of tomorrow will have to do their networking without me.’

I’d’ve never got away with saying that, ever.

Hugo raised his glass to her. ‘Well said, Julia!’

‘Ah,’ Uncle Brian did a sort of punctured laugh, ‘you’ll probably go far in the legal game, young lady, even if you do insist on a second-class university. You’ve got the art of the non-secateur off pat.’

‘Fabulous to earn your stamp of approval, Uncle Brian.’

A cow of an awkward pause mooed.

‘Hurrah!’ Uncle Brian scoffed. ‘She insists on the last word.’

‘You’ve got a strand of celery stuck to your chin, Uncle Brian.’

The coldest place in our house is the downstairs bog. In winter your bum freezes to the seat. Julia'd said goodbye to the Lambs and'd gone to Kate Alfrick's to do some history revision. Uncle Brian had gone up to the spare room 'to rest his eyes'. Alex'd gone to the bathroom for the third time since he'd arrived. Each time he took over twenty minutes. Don't know what he was finding to do in there. Dad was showing Hugo and Nigel his new Minolta. Mum and Aunt Alice were having a stroll round the windy garden. In the mirror above the washbasin I was scanning my face for signs of Hugo. Could I turn myself into him by sheer will-power? Cell by cell. Ross Wilcox is doing it. At primary school he was a thicko nobody, but now he smokes with older kids like Gilbert Swinyard and Pete Redmarley and people're calling him 'Ross' instead of 'Wilcox'. So there must be a way.

I'd sat down and done a good clean crap when I heard voices getting louder. Eavesdropping's wrong, I know, but it was hardly my fault if Mum and Aunt Alice chose to natter right outside the ventilator flaps, was it?

‘You shouldn’t be apologizing, Helena. Brian was...God, I could shoot him!’

‘Michael brings the worst out in him.’

‘No, let’s just...Helena, your rosemary! It’s virtually a tree. I just can’t get my herbs to thrive. Apart from the mint. The mint’s going crazy.’

A pause.

‘I wonder,’ Mum said, ‘what Daddy would make of them. If he could see them now, I mean.’

‘Brian and Michael?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, first he’d tell us, “Told you so!” Then, he’d roll up his sleeves, pick up whatever they were arguing the opposite of, and not leave the ring until both of them were battered into mute agreement.’

‘That’s a bit harsh.’

‘Not as harsh as Daddy! Julia would give him a run for his money, though.’

‘She can be rather...opinionated.’

‘At least it’s CND and Amnesty International she’s opinionated about, Helena, and not Meaty Loaf or the Deaf Leopards.’

A pause.

‘Hugo’s turning into a real charmer.’

““Charmer” is one word.”

‘But look at how he insisted on doing the washing-up. Of course, I couldn’t let him.’

‘Yes, I know, it wouldn’t melt in his mouth. Jason’s still painfully quiet. How’s his speech therapy going?’

(I didn’t want to hear this. But I couldn’t leave without flushing the bog. If I did, they’d know they’d been overheard. So I was stuck there.)

‘Snail’s pace. He sees this South African lady called Mrs de Roo. She tells us not to expect miracle cures. We don’t. She tells us to be patient with him. We are. Not much else to say.’

A long pause.

‘You know, Alice, even after all these years, I still find it hard to believe Mummy and Daddy have gone for good. That they are actually...dead. Not just on a cruise liner in the Indian Ocean, out of reach for six months. Or... What’s funny?’

‘Being stuck with Daddy on a cruise liner! That would be purgatory.’

Mum didn’t answer.

A longer pause.

‘Helena, I’m not prying,’ Aunt Alice’s voice’d shifted, ‘but you haven’t mentioned any more of those phantom telephone calls since January.’

A pause.

‘I’m sorry, Helena, I shouldn’t have stuck my beak into—’

‘No, no...I mean, God knows, who else can I discuss it with? No. There haven’t been any more. I feel a bit guilty for jumping to conclusions. It was just a storm in a teacup, I’m sure. A non-existent storm, I should say. If it hadn’t been for...you know, that “incident” of Michael’s five and a half years ago, or whenever it was, I wouldn’t’ve thought twice. Wrong numbers and crossed lines happen all the time. Don’t they?’

(‘Incident’?)

‘Exactly,’ Aunt Alice answered. ‘Exactly. You haven’t...said...’

‘A “confrontation” with Michael’d be like digging up a grave.’

(My goose bumps actually hurt.)

‘Of course it would,’ Aunt Alice answered.

‘The average Greenland trainee has a better idea of what goes on in the head of Michael Taylor than his own wife, half the time. Mind you, now I know why Mummy was so down, half the time.’

(I didn’t understand. I didn’t want to. I wanted to. I don’t know.)

‘You’re getting morbid, big sister.’

‘You’re my morbid-mop, Alice. You’ve got glamour. You get to meet Chinese violinists and swarthy Aztec pan-pipe ensembles. Who’s at the theatre this week?’

‘The Basil Brush Boom-Boom Road Show.’

‘See?’

‘Their agent is notoriously prickly. You’d think Liberace was in town, not some down-on-his-luck TV actor with his hand up a fox’s bum.’

‘No business like show business.’

A pause.

‘Helena, I know I’ve told you this twenty thousand times, but you need challenges bigger than Baked Alaskas. Julia’s flying the nest this year. Why don’t you think about going back to work?’

Short pause. ‘One, there’s a recession on and people are firing, not hiring. Two, I’m a morbid housewife. Three, I don’t live near London, I live in

darkest Worcestershire, and opportunities are thinner on the ground. Four, I haven't worked since Jason was born.'

'So what if your maternity leave went on for thirteen years longer than planned?'

Mum did that single laugh people who don't want to laugh do.

'Even Daddy used to boast about your designs to his golf club cronies. All I ever heard was Helena this, Helena that.'

'All I ever heard was Alice this, Alice that.'

'Well, that was Daddy all over, wasn't it? Come on. Show me where you're thinking of putting that rockery...'

I flushed the bog and sprayed the air freshener, holding my breath. Alpine Fresh Haze is a sickly smell.

Dad's Rover 3500 lives in one garage, but Mum usually parks her Datsun Cherry on the drive, so the second garage is spare. The bikes live along one wall. Dad's tools live in neat racks above his workbench. Potatoes live in a bottomless sack. The spare garage is sheltered, even on blowy days like today. Dad smokes in there, so there's often a whiff of cigarettes. I even like the oil stains on the concrete floor.

The best thing's the dart board, mind. Darts is ace. I love the thud as the spike sinks into the board. I love tugging the darts out. When I invited Hugo for a game, he said, 'Sure.' But then Nigel said he'd come too. Dad said, 'Brilliant idea,' so the three of us were in the garage playing Round-the-Clock. (Aim at 1 till you get a 1, then a 2 till you get a 2, then a 3, and so on. First to 20 wins.)

We threw one dart each to see who'd go first.

Hugo got 18, I got 10, Nigel got 4.

'So,' Nigel asked me as his brother got a 1 with his first dart, 'have you read The Lord of the Rings?'

'No,' Maggot lied, so Hugo didn't think I was being pally.

Hugo missed 2 with his next dart, but got it with his third.

Nigel told me, 'It's epic.'

Hugo got the three darts and passed them to me. 'Nigel, nobody says "epic" any more.'

(I tried to remember if I'd said it since the Lambs came.)

I missed 1 with my first two darts, but got it with my third.

'Nice throw,' said Hugo.

‘We had to do The Hobbit at school,’ Nigel got the darts, ‘but The Hobbit’s basically just a fairy tale.’

‘I tried The Lord of the Rings,’ Hugo said, ‘but it’s laughable. Everyone’s called Gondogorn or Sarulon and runs about saying, “These woods’ll be swarming with orcs by nightfall.” And as for that Sam, and his “Oh, Master Frodo, what a bootiful dagger you’ve got” – well! They shouldn’t let that sort of homo-erotic porn near children. Maybe that’s the appeal, Nigel?’

Nigel missed the board and his dart bounced off the brick.

Hugo sighed. ‘Do be careful, Nigel. You’re blunting Jace’s darts.’

I should’ve said ‘It doesn’t matter’ to Nigel. Maggot didn’t.

Nigel’s second dart hit the outside rim of the board. A miss.

‘Did you know, Jace,’ said Hugo, casually, ‘it’s a scientific fact that homosexuals can’t throw straight?’

To my alarm, I realized Nigel was close to tears.

Hugo has a way of affecting other people’s luck.

Nigel’s third dart hit the rim of the board and pinged off. He snapped. ‘You’re always turning people against me!’ Red and furious. ‘I hate you, you bloody bastard!’

‘Not a nice word, Nigel. Do you know what a bastard is, or are you parroting your playmates in your chess club again?’

‘Yes I do, actually!'

‘Yes you know what a bastard is? Or yes you’re parroting your playmates?’

‘Yes I know what a bastard is and you’re one!’

‘So if I’m a bastard, you’re saying our mother shagged another man to conceive me, right? So you’re accusing her of playing away, are you?’

Tears brimmed in Nigel’s eyes.

This’d bring trouble crashing down, I knew it.

Hugo did an amused tut. ‘Dad won’t be best pleased to hear your accusation either. Look, why don’t you just run along and fiddle with your Rubik’s cube in a quiet corner somewhere? Jason and I will do our best to forget the whole business.’

‘Sorry about Nigel.’ Hugo got 3, a miss and 4. ‘Such a space cadet. He has to learn how to detect hints, and act on them. One day he’ll thank me for my tutelage. Alex the Neandarthal dork is beyond help, I fear.’

I did a sort of laugh, wondering how Hugo makes words like “tutelage” and “alas” sound powerful and not prattish. I threw a miss, then a 2, a 3.

‘Ted Hughes came to our school last term,’ Hugo mentioned.

Now I knew he didn’t hold my poetry prize against me. ‘Yeah?’

Hugo threw a 5, a 6, a miss. ‘He signed my copy of The Hawk in the Rain.’

‘The Hawk in the Rain is brilliant.’ A 4, a miss, a miss.

‘I’m more into the First World War poets, myself.’ Hugo threw a 7, an 8, a miss. ‘Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke and that lot.’

‘Yeah.’ I threw a 5, a miss, a 6. ‘I prefer them too, if I’m honest.’

‘But George Orwell’s the man.’ A 9, a miss, a miss. ‘I’ve got everything he ever wrote, including a first-edition Nineteen Eighty-Four.’

A miss, a miss, a 7. ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’s just incredible.’ (Actually I’d got bogged down in O’Brien’s long essay and never finished it.) ‘And Animal Farm.’ (We’d had to read that at school.)

Hugo threw a 10. ‘If you don’t read his journalism,’ a near miss, ‘you can’t say you know Orwell.’ Another near-miss. ‘Damn. I’ll post you this collection of essays, Inside the Whale.’

‘Thanks.’ I fluked an 8, a 9, a 10, and acted like it was nothing special.

‘Brilliant throwing! Tell you what, Jace, let’s liven things up a bit. Got any money on you?’

I had 50p.

‘Okay, I’ll match that. First to twenty wins fifty pence off the other.’

Half my pocket money was a bit of a risk.

‘Go on, Jace.’ Hugo grinned like he really liked me. ‘Don’t be a Nigel. Tell you what, you can have your turn again, to start. Three free throws.’

Saying yes’d make me more like Hugo. ‘Okay.’

‘Good man. But best not mention it to’ Hugo nodded through the garage wall ‘the maters and the paters, or we’ll spend the rest of the afternoon playing ludo or the Game of Life under strict supervision.’

‘Sure.’ I missed, hit the wall, and missed.

‘Bad luck,’ said Hugo. He missed, got an 11, missed.

‘What’s rowing like, then?’ I got my 11, missed, got 12. ‘All I’ve been on are the pedalos at Malvern Winter Gardens.’

Hugo laughed like I’d made a really funny joke, so I grinned like I had. He missed 12 three times in a row.

‘Hard luck,’ I said.

‘Rowing’s phenomenal. All rushing, muscles, rhythm and speed, but only the odd splash, or grunt, or crewmate’s breathing. Like sex, now I think about it. Annihilating your opponents is fun, too. Like our sports master says, “Boys, it’s not the taking part that matters. It’s the winning that counts!”’

I threw a 13, 14, then 15.

‘My God!’ Hugo made a blowing, impressed face. ‘Not suckering me here, are you, Jace? Tell you what, how about fleecing me for one pound?’ Hugo slipped a sleek wallet from his Levi’s and waved a £1 note at me.

‘The way you’re playing today, this smacker’ll be yours in five throws. What does your piggy bank say?’

If I lost I wouldn’t have any money until next Saturday.

‘Oooooo,’ crooked Hugo. ‘Don’t chicken out on us now, Jace.’

I heard Hugo talking about me to other Hugos in his rowing club. My cousin Jason Taylor is such a space cadet. ‘Okay.’

‘Okay!’ Hugo slipped the pound note into his top pocket. He then threw a 12, a 13 and a 14. He made a surprised noise. ‘Wonder if my luck might be turning?’

My first dart hit the brick. My second pinged off the metal. My third missed.

Without hesitating, Hugo threw a straight 15, 16 and 17.

Footsteps clopped from the back door to the garage door. Hugo cursed under his breath, and flashed me a look that said, Leave it to me.

I couldn’t’ve done anything else.

‘Hugo!’ Aunt Alice stormed into the spare garage. ‘Would you care to tell me why Nigel’s in floods of tears?’

Hugo’s reaction was Oscar-winning. ‘Tears?’

‘Yes!’

‘Tears? Mum, that boy is unbelievable sometimes!’

‘I’m not asking you to believe anything! I want you to explain!’

‘What’s there to explain?’ Hugo did this lost, sorry shrug. ‘Jason invited Nigel and me for a nice game of darts. Nigel kept missing. I gave him a couple of pointers, but he ended up storming off in a tizzy. Spouting foul-mouthed “French”, too. Why’s that boy so competitive, Mum? Remember

how we caught him making up words just to win at Scrabble? Do you think it's growing pains?’

Aunt Alice turned to me. ‘Jason? What’s your version of events?’

Hugo could sell Nigel to a glue factory and Maggot would still say, ‘It’s just like Hugo said, really, Aunt Alice.’

‘He’s welcome back,’ Hugo assured her, ‘once his tantrum’s blown over. If you don’t mind, Jace? Nigel didn’t mean what he called you.’

‘I don’t mind at all.’

‘Here’s another idea.’ Aunt Alice knew she’d been stalemated. ‘Your Aunt Helena’s low on coffee, and your father’ll need a strong mug when he wakes up. I’m volunteering you to go and get some. Jason, perhaps you’d show your non-stick cousin the way, since you’re obviously such allies.’

‘We’ve almost finished this game, Mum, so—’

Aunt Alice set her jaw.

Isaac Pye, the landlord of the Black Swan, came into the games room at the back to see what the fuss was about. Hugo stood at the Asteroids console, surrounded by me, Grant Burch, Burch's servant Philip Phelps, Neal Brose, Ant Little, Oswald Wyre and Darren Croome. None of us could believe it. Hugo'd been on for twenty minutes on the same 10p. The screen was full of floating asteroids and I'd've died in three seconds flat. But Hugo reads the whole screen at once, not just the one rock that's most dangerous. He almost never uses his thrusters. He makes every torpedo count. When the zigzagging UFO comes he lays in a salvo of torpedoes only if the asteroid storm isn't too heavy. Otherwise, he ignores it. He only uses the hyperspace button as a last resort. His face stays calm, like he's reading a quite interesting book.

'That's never three mill'yun!' said Isaac Pye.

'Almost three an' a half million,' Grant Burch told him.

When Hugo's last bonus life finally erupted in a shower of stars, the machine did bleepy whoops and announced the All Time Top Score'd been topped. That stays on even if the machine's switched off. 'I spent a fiver getting up to two and a half mill'yun the other night,' grunted Isaac Pye, 'an' that were the bullock's bollocks, I thought. I'd stand you a pint, lad, but there's two off-duty coppers in the bar.'

'That's good of you,' Hugo told Isaac Pye, 'but I daren't get caught on a drunk-in-charge-of-a-spacecraft rap.'

Isaac Pye did a Wurzel snigger and ambled back to the bar.

Hugo entered his name as JHC.

Grant Burch asked it. 'What's that stand for, then?'

"“Jesus H. Christ”."

Grant Burch laughed, so everyone else did. God, I felt proud. Neal Brose'd tell Gary Drake how Jason Taylor hung out with Jesus Christ.

Oswald Wyre said, ‘How many years did it take you to get that good?’

‘Years?’ Hugo’s accent’d gone just a bit less posh and just a bit more London. ‘Mastering an arcade game shouldn’t take that long.’

‘Must’ve taken a pile of dosh, though,’ said Neal Brose. ‘To get that much practice, I mean.’

‘Money’s never a problem, not if you’ve got half a brain.’

‘No?’

‘Money? ’Course not. Identify a demand, handle its supply, make your customers grateful, kill off the opposition.’

Neal Brose memorized every word of that.

Grant Burch got out a pack of cigarettes. ‘Smoke, mate?’

If Hugo said ‘No’ he’d damage the impression he’d made.

‘Cheers,’ Hugo peered at the box of Players No. 6, ‘but anything except Lambert Butler makes my throat feel like shit for hours. No offence.’

I memorized every word of that. What a way to get out of smoking.

‘Yeah,’ Grant Burch said, ‘Woodbines do that to me.’

From the bar we heard Isaac Pye repeat, ““I daren’t get caught on a drunk-in-charge-of-a-spacecraft rap”!”

Dawn Madden’s mum peered at Hugo from the smoke-fogged bar.

‘Are that woman’s boobs for real?’ Hugo hissed at us. ‘Or are they a pair of spare heads?’

Mr Rhydd sticks Lucozade-yellow plastic sheets over his windows to stop the displays fading. But his ‘displays’ are only ever pyramids of canned pears, and the plastic sheets make inside his shop feel like a photograph from Victorian times. Hugo and I read the notices on the board for second-hand Lego, kittens needing homes, good-as-new washing machines for £10 O.N.O. and ads promising you hundreds of extra pounds in your spare time. The cold-soapy, rotting-orangey, newsprinty smell of Mr Rhydd’s hits you the moment you’re inside. There’s the post office booth in one corner where Mrs Rhydd the postmistress sells stamps and dog licences, though not today ’cause today’s Saturday. Mrs Rhydd’s signed the Official Secrets Act but she looks quite normal. There’s a rack of greetings cards showing men dressed like Prince Philip fishing in rivers saying ‘On Father’s Day’ or foxgloves in a cottage garden saying ‘For My Dearest Grandmother’. There are shelves of alphabet spaghetti, Pedigree Chum and Ambrosia Rice Pudding. There are packs of toys like blow-football and play-money that never sell ’cause they’re too crap. A Slush Puppy machine makes cups of snow in felt-pen colours, but not in March. Behind the counter are cigarettes and shelves of beer and wine. On high shelves are jars of Sherbert Bombs, Cola Cubes, Cider Apples and Navy Tablets. These come in paper bags.

‘Wow,’ said Hugo. ‘Thrillsville. I’ve died and gone to Harrods.’

Just then Kate Alfrick, Julia’s best friend, breezed in, and got to the counter at the same time as Robin South’s mum. Robin South’s mum let Kate go first ’cause Kate just wanted a bottle of wine. She can buy alcohol ’cause she’s turned eighteen.

‘Ta very much.’ Mr Rhydd handed Kate her change. ‘Celebrating?’

‘Not really,’ said Kate. ‘Mum and Dad are coming back from Norfolk tomorrow evening. Thought I’d have a nice dinner ready to welcome them home. This,’ she tapped the bottle, ‘is the finishing touch.’

‘Jolly good,’ Mr Rhydd said, ‘jolly good. Now then, Mrs South...’

Kate passed us on her way out. ‘Hello, Jason.’

‘Hello, Kate.’

‘Hi, Kate,’ said Hugo. ‘I’m his cousin.’

Kate studied Hugo through her Russian secretary glasses. ‘The one called Hugo.’

‘Only three hours in Black Swan Green,’ Hugo did a funny stagger of amazement, ‘and I’m being discussed already?’

I told Hugo it was to Kate’s house Julia’d gone to revise.

‘Oh, so you’re that Kate.’ He gestured at the wine. ‘Liebfraumilch?’

‘Yes,’ Kate said, in a what’s it to you? voice. ‘Liebfraumilch.’

‘Bit sweet. You look drier. More the chardonnay type.’

(The only wines I know are red, white, fizzy and rosé.)

‘Could be you don’t know your types as well as you think you do.’

‘Could be, Kate,’ Hugo combed his hair with his hand, ‘could be. Well, we mustn’t keep you away from your revision any longer. Doubtless you and Julia are hard at it. Hope we’ll bump into each other again, some time.’

Kate did a frowning smile. ‘I shouldn’t pin your hopes on it.’

‘Not all my hopes, Kate, no. That would be rash. But the world can surprise you. I am a younger man, but this much I do know.’

At the door Kate looked over her shoulder.

Hugo had this cocky See? expression ready.

Kate left, cross.

‘How,’ Hugo reminded me of Uncle Brian, ‘appetizing.’

I paid Mr Rhydd for the coffee. Hugo said, ‘That’s never real crystallized ginger you have in that jar, right up at the top?’

‘Certainly is, Blue.’ Mr Rhydd calls all us kids ‘Blue’ so he doesn’t have to remember our names. He blew his cracked Mr Punch nose. ‘Mrs Yew’s mother was partial to it, so I’d order it in for her. She passed away with a new jar barely touched.’

‘Fascinating. My Aunt Drucilla, who we’re staying with in Bath, adores crystallized ginger. I’m sorry to send you up your ladder again, but...’

‘No bother, Blue,’ Mr Rhydd stuffed his hanky into his pocket, ‘no bother at all.’ He dragged his ladder over, climbed up and groped for the far jar.

Hugo checked nobody else was in the shop.

He eeled forwards on his chest, over the counter, reached between the rungs of the ladder, just six inches under Mr Rhydd’s Hush Puppies, took a box of Lambert Butler cigarettes, and eeled back.

Numb, I mouthed at him, What are you doing?

Hugo stuffed the cigarettes down his pants. ‘Jason, are you okay?’

Mr Rhydd shook the jar down at us. ‘This’d be the badger, Blue?’ His nostrils were sockets stuffed with hairy darkness.

‘That would indeed be the badger, Mr Rhydd,’ said Hugo.

‘Jolly good, jolly good.’

I was shitting myself.

And then, as Mr Rhydd eased himself down the ladder, Hugo snatched two Cadbury’s Crème Eggs from the tray and dropped them in my duffel coat pocket. If I’d struggled now or even tried to put them back, Mr

Rhydd'd've noticed. To top it all, in the moment between Mr Rhydd's foot touching the ground and Mr Rhydd turning round to face us, Hugo swiped a packet of Fisherman's Friends and stuffed that in with the Crème Eggs. The packet rustled. Mr Rhydd wiped dust off the jar. 'What'll it be, Blue? Quarter of a pound do you?'

'A quarter of a pound would be excellent, Mr Rhydd.'

‘Why d’you’ (Hangman blocked ‘nick’ then ‘steal’ so I had to use the naff ‘pinch’) ‘pinch the fags?’ I wanted to scarper away from the crime scene as quick as possible, but a slow queue of traffic’d built up behind a tractor so we couldn’t cross the crossroads yet.

‘Plebs smoke “fags”. I smoke cigarettes. I don’t “pinch”. Plebs “pinch”. I “liberate”.’

‘Then why did you “liberate” the—’ (now I couldn’t say ‘cigarettes’).

‘Ye-es?’ prompted Hugo.

‘The Lambert Butlers.’

‘If you mean “Why did you liberate the cigarettes?” it’s because smoking is a simple pleasure, with no proven side effects except lung cancer and heart disease. I intend to be long dead by then. If you mean “Why choose Lambert Butlers in particular?” it’s because I wouldn’t be seen homeless smoking anything else, except for Passing Cloud. Which that tragic old dipso doesn’t stock in his village grocery, of course.’

I still didn’t get it. ‘Haven’t you got enough money to buy them?’

This amused my cousin. ‘Do I look like I haven’t got enough money?’

‘But why take the risk?’

‘Ah, the liberated cigarette is the sweetest.’

Now I knew how Aunt Alice felt in the garage earlier. ‘But why’d you take the Fisherman’s Friends and the Crème Eggs?’

‘The Fisherman’s Friends are insurance against Mr Tobacco Breath. The Crème Eggs were insurance against you.’

‘Insurance against me?’

‘You’ll hardly grass on me if you also had liberated contraband on you, would you?’

An oil tanker inched past, puking out fumes.

‘I didn’t grass you off when you made Nigel cry earlier, did I?’

‘Made Nigel cry? Who made Nigel cry?’

Then I noticed Kate Alfrick’s house, or rather a silver MG parked round the side. This guy who definitely wasn’t Julia opened the front door for Kate as she walked up her drive, carrying her wine. The upstairs curtains twitched. ‘Hey, look—’

‘Let’s cross.’ Hugo edged towards an oncoming gap. ‘Hey, look what?’

We dashed across the road, to the path to the lake in the woods.

‘Nothing.’

‘No no no no no, you’re holding it like a Hollywood Nazi. Relax! Just hold it like it’s a fountain pen. There. Now, let there be light...’ My cousin reached inside his jacket. ‘Of course, it takes a lighter to impress the quality quim, but lighters do give the game away if found in your blazer pocket by prying Nigels. So Swan Vestas will have to do for this afternoon’s lesson.’

The lake was nervous with ripples and counter-ripples.

‘I didn’t see you liberate those at Mr Rhydd’s.’

‘I took them from that grebo in the pub who called me “mate”.’

‘You pinched Grant Burch’s matches?’

‘Don’t look so appalled. Why would “Grant Burch” suspect me? I’d turned down his mucky cigarette. Yet another perfect crime.’

Hugo lit a match, cupped it and leant towards me.

A sudden jostle of wind snatched the Lambert Butler from my fingers. It fell between the slats of the bench. ‘Oh, bum,’ I said, bending down to retrieve it. ‘Soz.’

‘Take a new one and don’t say “soz”. I’ll have to donate the surplus tobacco to the local wildlife, anyway.’ My cousin held out the pack of Lambert Butlers. ‘The wise dealer never risks getting caught in possession.’

I looked at the offered packet. ‘Hugo, I’m grateful to you for...y’know, showing me, and everything, but, to be honest, I’m not sure if—’

‘Jace!’ Hugo did a jokey-amazed face. ‘Don’t say you’re backing out now? I thought we’d decided to strip you of this shameful virginity of yours?’

‘Yeah...but maybe...not today.’

Blind boars of wind crashed through the anxious woods.

““Not today”, huh?”

I nodded, worried he’d be pissed off.

‘Your choice, Jace.’ Hugo pulled the gentlest face. ‘I mean, we’re friends, aren’t we? I’d hardly twist your arm into doing something against your will.’

‘Thanks.’ I felt stupid with gratitude.

‘But,’ Hugo lit his own cigarette, ‘it’s my duty to point out, this isn’t just about smoking a humble cancer stick.’

‘How do you mean?’

Hugo grimaced in a Should I or shouldn’t I? quandary.

‘Go on. Say it.’

‘You need to hear some hard truths, cousin,’ he took a deep drag, ‘but first I have to know you know I’m telling you them for your own good.’

‘Okay. I’ (Hangman gripped ‘know’) ‘understand.’

‘Promise me?’

‘Promise.’

The green or grey of Hugo’s eyes depends on the weather. ‘This “not today” attitude of yours is a cancer. Cancer of the character. It stunts your growth. Other kids sense your not-todayness, and despise you for it. “Not-today” is why those plebs in the Black Swan make you nervous. “Not today” – I would bet – is at the root of that speech defect of yours.’ (A shame-bomb blew my head off.) ““Not today” condemns you to be the lapdog of authority, any bully, any shitehawk. They sense you won’t stand up to them. Not today, not ever. “Not today” is the blind slave of every petty rule. Even the rule that says’ (Hugo did this bleaty voice) ““No,

smoking is BAD! Don't listen to naughty Hugo Lamb!" Jason, you have to kill "not today".'

This was so appallingly true I could only try to smile.

Then Hugo said, 'I was you myself, Jace, once. Just the same. Always afraid. But there's another reason why you must smoke this cigarette. Not because it's the first step to becoming someone your turkey-shagging schoolmates will respect instead of exploit. Not because a young blood with a mature cigarette is a better proposition to the ladies than a boy with a sherbert dip. It's this. Come here. I'll whisper it.' Hugo leant so close his lips touched my ears and 10,000 volts sang all over my nervous system. (For a split second I had a vision of Hugo the Oarsman out on the water, cathedrals and river banks blurring by, biceps stiffening and loosening under his vest, with girlfriends lining the river. Girlfriends ready to lick him where he told them.) 'If you don't kill "not today",' Hugo did a horror-movie trailer voice, 'One day you'll wake up, look in the mirror and see Brian and Uncle Michael!'

‘Attaboy...breathe in...through your mouth, not your nose...’

The mouthful of gassy dirt left my mouth.

Hugo was stern. ‘You didn’t suck it into your lungs, did you, Jace?’

I shook my head, wanting to spit.

‘You have to inhale, Jace. Into your lungs. Otherwise it’s like sex without an orgasm.’

‘Okay.’ (I don’t actually know what an orgasm is, apart from what you call someone who’s done something stupid.) ‘Right.’

‘I’m just going to pinch your nose,’ said Hugo, ‘to stop you cheating.’ His fingers closed off my nostrils. ‘Deep breath – not too deep – and let the smoke go down with the air.’ Then his other hand sealed my mouth shut. The air was cold but his hands were warm. ‘One, two...three!’

In came the hot gassy dirt. My lungs flooded with it.

‘Hold it there,’ urged Hugo. ‘One, two, three, four, five, and—’ he released my lips, ‘—out.’

The smoke leaked out, a genie from its bottle.

The wind atomized the genie.

‘And that,’ said Hugo, ‘is all there is to it.’

Vile. ‘Nice.’

‘It’ll grow on you. Finish the cigarette.’ Hugo perched himself on the back of the bench and relit his own Lambert Butler. ‘As aquatic spectacles go, I am a trifle underwhelmed by your lake. Is this where the swans are?’

‘There aren’t any actual swans in Black Swan Green.’ My second drag was as revolting as my first. ‘It’s a sort of village joke. The lake was classic in January, mind. It froze over. We played British Bulldogs actually on the ice. Though I found out afterwards there’s about twenty kids who’ve drowned in this lake, down the years.’

‘Who could blame them?’ Hugo did a weary sigh. ‘Black Swan Green might not be the arsehole of the world, but it’s got a damn good view of it. You’ve gone a bit pale, Jace.’

‘I’m fine.’

The first torrent of vomit kicked a GUUURRRRRR noise out of me and poured on to the muddy grass. In the hot slurry were shreds of prawn and carrot. Some'd got on my splayed fingers. It was as warm as warm rice pudding. More was coming. Inside my eyelids was a Lambert Butler cigarette sticking out of its box, like in an advert. The second torrent was a mustardier yellow. I guppered for fresh oxygen like a man in an airlock. Prayed that was the last of it. Then came three short, boiling sub-slurries, slicker and sweeter. Must have been the Baked Alaska.

Oh, Jesus.

I washed my puke-stained hand in the lake, then wiped away the tears from my puke-teared eyes. I'm so ashamed. Hugo's trying to teach me how to be a kid like him, but I can't even smoke a single cigarette.

'I'm really,' I wipe my mouth, 'really sorry.'

But Hugo's not even looking at me.

Hugo's squirmed out on the bench, facing the churned-up sky.

My cousin's sobbing with laughter.

Bridlepath

My eye spidered over my poster of black angelfish turning into white swans, across my map of Middle Earth, around my door frame, into my curtains, lit fiery mauve by my spring sun, and fell down the well of dazzle.

Listening to houses breathe makes you weightless.

But a lie-in's less satisfying if other people aren't up and about, so I jumped out of bed. The landing curtains were still drawn 'cause Mum and Julia'd left for London when it was dark. Dad's away on another weekend conference in Newcastle under Lyme or Newcastle on Tyne. Today, the house is all mine.

First I pissed, leaving the bathroom door wide open. Next, in Julia's bedroom, I put on her Roxy Music LP. Julia'd go ape. I turned up the volume, dead loud. Dad'd go so mental his head'd blow up. I sprawled on Julia's stripey sofa, listening to this kazookering song called 'Virginia Plain'. With my big toe, I flicked the shell-disc wind chime Kate Alfrick'd given her a couple of birthdays ago. Just 'cause I could. Then I went through my sister's chest-of-drawers looking for a secret diary. But when I found a box of tampons I felt ashamed and stopped.

In Dad's chilly office I opened his filing cabinets and breathed in their metal-flavoured air. (A duty-free pack of Benson Hedges has appeared since Uncle Brian's last visit.) Then I twizzled on Dad's Millennium Falcon office chair, remembered it was April Fools' Day, picked up Dad's untouchable telephone and said, 'Hello? Craig Salt? Jason Taylor here. Listen, Salt, you're sacked. What do you mean, why? 'Cause you're a fat orgasm, that's why. Put me through to Ross Wilcox this instant! Ah, Wilcox? Jason Taylor. Listen, the vet'll be around later to put you out of our misery. Bye-bye, Scumbag. Been nasty knowing you.'

In my parents' creamy bedroom I sat at Mum's dressing table, spiked my hair with L'Oréal hair mousse, daubed an Adam Ant stripe across my face, and held her opal brooch over one eye. I looked through it at the sun for secret colours nobody's ever named.

Downstairs, a wafer of light from where the kitchen curtains didn't quite meet sliced through a gold Yale key and this note:

Dear Jason

Here's your front door key—
DON'T LOSE IT. I've left
a spare with Mrs. Woolmere
incase you do. Aunt Alice's
phone number is on the
pad. If you're poorly you
can go to Mrs. Woolmere's.
You can make yourself a
sandwich for lunch, but
put the bread back in

the bin or it will go
stale. Quiche Lorraine in
the fridge for dinner.
Eat the bowl of fruit
salad. Will be back by
10 this evening. Switch
everything off when you
go out. LOCK THE DOOR.
Don't invite anyone in.
Don't watch too much
T.V. Love Mum

Wow. My very own door key. Mum must've decided to leave it for me at the last minute this morning. Normally we hide a spare in a welly in the garage. I dashed upstairs and chose a keyring Uncle Brian gave me one time, of a rabbit in a black bow tie. I hung it on my belt-loop and slid down the banister. For breakfast I ate McVitie's Jamaican Ginger Cake and a cocktail of milk, Coke and Ovaltine. Not bad. Oh, better than not bad! Every single hour of today is a Black Magic chocolate, waiting in its box for me. I returned the kitchen radio from Radio 4 to Radio 1. That fab song with the dusty flute in it by Men At Work was on. Three Marks Spencer's French Fancies, I ate, straight out of the packet. Vs of long-distance birds crossed the sky. Mermaid clouds drifted over the glebe, over the cockerel tree, over the Malvern Hills. God, I ached to follow them.

What was stopping me?

Mr Castle stood in a pair of green wellies, washing his Vauxhall Viva with a garden hose. His front door was open, but the hallway was dead dark. Mrs Castle could've been in that dark, watching me. You hardly ever see Mrs Castle. Mum calls her 'that poor woman' and says she suffers from Nerves. Is Nerves infectious? I didn't want to dent the morning's shine by stammering, so I tried to slip by Mr Castle without being seen.

'Morning, young fella!'

'Good morning, Mr Castle,' I answered.

'Off anywhere special?'

I shook my head. Mr Castle somehow makes me nervous. Once I heard Dad telling Uncle Brian he's a freemason, which is something to do with witchcraft and pentangles. 'It's just it's a' (Hangman blocked nice) 'a... pleasant morning, so...'

'Oh, isn't it just. Isn't it just!'

Liquid sunshine streamed down the car windscreen.

'So how old are you now, Jason?' Mr Castle asked this like he'd been discussing it with a panel of experts for days.

'Thirteen,' I said, guessing he thought I was still twelve.

'Thirteen, are you? That a fact?'

'Thirteen.'

'Thirteen.' Mr Castle looked through me. 'Ancient.'

The stile at the mouth of Kingfisher Meadows is the source of the bridlepath. A green sign saying PUBLIC BRIDLEPATH with a picture of a horse proves it. Where the bridlepath officially ends is miles less clear. Mr Broadwas says it fizzles out in Red Earl Wood. Pete Redmarley and Nick Yew said they went rabbiting with their ferrets up the bridlepath one time, and that it's blocked by a new estate in Malvern Wells. But best is the rumour that the bridlepath leads you to the foot of Pinnacle Hill, where, if you pick your way through toothy brambles and dark ivy and vicious stingers, you'll find the mouth of an old tunnel. Go through that tunnel, and you come out in Herefordshire. Near the obelisk. The tunnel's been lost since olden times, so its discoverer'd make the front page of the Malvern Gazetteer. How cool'd that be?

I would track the bridlepath to its mysterious end, wherever it might be.

The very first stretch of the bridlepath is no mystery at all. Every kid in the village's been down that neck a million times. It just leads past some back gardens to the footy field. The footy field's actually a scrap of ground behind the village hall that belongs to Gilbert Swinyard's dad. When Mr Swinyard's sheep aren't on it, we're allowed to play footy there. We use coats for goals and don't bother with throw-ins. The scores climb as high as rugby scores, and one game can last hours, until the last-but-one kid goes home. Sometimes all the Welland and Castlemorton lot come over on their bikes and then the games are more like battles.

Not a soul was on the footy field this morning, only me. Later on, chances were, a game'd start up. None of the players'd know Jason Taylor'd already been there before them. I'd be fields and fields away by then. Maybe deep under the Malvern Hills.

Oily flies fed on curry-coloured cowpats.

New leaves oozed from twigs in the hedges.

Seeds thickened the air, like sweet gravy.

In the copse, the bridlepath joined up with a moon-cratered track. Trees knitted overhead, so only knots and loops of sky showed. Dark and cool, it was, and I wondered if I should've brought my coat. Down a hollow, round the bend, I came across a thatched cottage made of sooty bricks and crooked timber. Martins were busy under its eaves. PRIVATE, said a sign, hung on the slatted gate, where the name should go. Newborn flowers in the garden were Liquorice Allsorts blue, pink and yellow. Maybe I heard scissors. Maybe I heard a poem, seeping from its cracks. So I stood and listened, just for a minute, like a hungry robin listening for worms.

Or two minutes, or three.

Dogs hurled themselves at me.

I hurled myself back, across the track, clean on to my arse.

The gate shrieked but, thank God, stayed shut.

Two, no, three, Dobermanns jostled and slammed, standing on their back legs, barking insanely. Even when I got up they were still as tall as me. I should've just gone while I had the chance, but the dogs had prehistoric fangs and rabies eyes, gammon tongues and steel chains round their necks. Their brown-polish-on-black suede skins wrapped not just dogs' bodies, but something else too, something that needed to kill.

I was scared but I still had to look at the dogs.

Then I got a savage poke in that bone that's the stump of a tail.

'You're goadin' my boys on!'

I whirled round. The man's lip was gnarled and his sooty hair had a streak of white like combed-in bird crap. In his hand was a walking stick strong enough to stave in a skull. 'You're goadin' my boys!'

I swallowed. Laws down the bridlepath are different to main-road laws.

'I don't appreciate that.' He glanced at the Dobermanns. 'SHUT IT!'

The dogs fell quiet and got down from the gate.

'Oh, a whole yard o'guts you've got,' the man studied me some more, 'goadin' my boys from this side o' the gate.'

'They're...beautiful animals.'

'Oh, aye? My boys'd turn you into mincemeat if I gave 'em the nod. Still call 'em beautiful animals then, would you?'

‘I s’pose not.’

‘I s’pose not. Live down them fancy new houses, don’t you?’

I nodded.

‘Knew it. Locals have more respect for my boys than some townie. You come here, come traipsin’ about, leavin’ gates open, puttin’ up your little toy mansions on land we’ve been workin’ for generations. Makes me sick. Just lookin’ at you.’

‘I didn’t mean any harm. Honest.’

He twizzled his stick. ‘You can bugger off now.’

I began walking, fast, just looking over my shoulder once.

The man hadn’t taken his eyes off me.

Faster, warned Unborn Twin. Run!

I froze, watching the man open the gate. His wave was almost friendly.
‘GET THE BUGGER, BOYS!’

The three black Dobermanns were galloping straight at me.

I ran full pelt but I knew thirteen-year-old boys can’t outrun three snarling Dobermanns. A snatch of turfy drumming, then I went flying over a ruck and the ground booted the air out of me and I got a glimpse of a leaping dog’s flank. I screamed like a girl and scrunched up into a ball and waited for the fangs to sink into my side and ankles and slaver and rip and tear and pluck and for the snarling bag-snatchers to run off with my scrote and liver and heart and kidneys.

A cuckoo'd started up, very near. Surely a minute'd already passed?

I opened my eyes and raised my head.

No sign of the dogs or their master.

A butterfly not from England fanned open and shut, inches away.
Cautiously, I got up.

I'd have a couple of glorious bruises, and my pulse was still fast and broken. But otherwise I was okay.

Okay, but poisoned. The dog man despised me for not being born here. He despised me for living down Kingfisher Meadows. That's a hate you can't argue with. No more than you can argue with mad Dobermanns.

I carried on up the bridlepath, out of the copse.

Dewy cobwebs snap-twanged across my face.

The big field was full of wary ewes and spanking-new lambs. The lambs tiggered up close, bleeping like those crap Fiat Noddy cars, idiotically pleased to see me. The poison of the Dobermanns and their master began to thin, a little. A couple of the mother sheep edged closer. They didn't quite trust me. Just as well for sheep they can't work out why the farmer's being so nice to them. (Human beings need to watch out for reasonless niceness too. It's never reasonless and its reason's not usually nice.)

So anyway, I was halfway over the field when I spotted three kids up on the old railway embankment. Up on the Hollow Log, by the brick bridge. They'd already seen me, and if I changed course they'd know I was chickening out of meeting them. So I set a course straight for them. I chewed a stick of Juicy Fruit I found in my pocket. Here and there I penalty-shot a poking-up thistle, just to look a bit hard.

Lucky I did. The three kids were Grant Burch, his servant Philip Phelps, and Ant Little, passing round a fag. From inside the log crawled out Darren Croome, Dean Moran and Squelch.

Grant Burch called down from the log, 'All right, Taylor?'

Phelps said, 'Come to see the scrap?'

From the foot of the embankment I called up, 'What scrap?'

'Me,' Grant Burch squished one nostril and torpedoed a bolt of hot snot out of the other, 'stick Ross Wankstain Wilcox the Third.'

Good news. 'What's the scrap about?'

'Me and Swinyard were playin' Asteroids at the Black Swan yesterday evenin', right. Wilcox comes in, actin' like King Hard Knock, sayin' nothin', then he goes an' drops his fag in my shandy. Couldn't fuckin' believe it! I says, "D'you do that on purpose?" Wilcox says, "What d'you reckon?" I says, "You're gonna fuckin' regret that, Piss Flaps."'

‘Classic!’ Philip Phelps grinned. ““Piss Flaps”!”

‘Phelps,’ Grant Burch frowned, ‘don’t interrupt me when I’m talking.’

‘Sorry, Grant.’

‘So anyway, I says, “Yer gonna fuckin’ regret that, Piss Flaps.” Wilcox says, “Make me.” I says, “Wanna step outside, then?” Wilcox says, “Trust you to pick a place Isaac Pye can come and pull me off yer.” I says, “Okay, Prick Cheese, you say where.” Wilcox says, “T’morrer mornin’. The Hollow Log. Nine thirty.” I says, “Better order an ambulance, Turd Burglar. I’ll be there.” Wilcox just says “Good” and walks out.’

Ant Little said, ‘Wilcox’s crazy. You’re gonna cream him, Grant.’

‘Yeah,’ said Darren Croome. ‘Course you are.’

Great news. Ross Wilcox’s building up a sort of gang at school and he’s made it pretty clear he’s got it in for me. Grant Burch is one of the hardest kids in the third year. Wilcox getting his face kicked in’d label him as a loser and a leper.

‘What’s the time now, Phelps?’

Phelps checked his watch. ‘Quarter to ten, Grant.’

Ant Little said, ‘Chickened out, I reckon.’

Grant Burch flobbed again. ‘We’ll stay till ten. Then we’re off down Wellington Gardens to invite Wilcox out to play. Nobody gets away with being that arsey to me.’

Phelps said, ‘What about his dad, Grant?’

‘What about his dad, Phelps?’

‘Didn’t he put Wilcox’s mum in hospital?’

‘I ain’t scared of a bent mechanic. Give us another fag.’

Phelps mumbled, ‘Only Woodbines left, Grant, sorry.’

‘Woodbines?’

‘They’re all my mum had in her handbag. Sorry.’

‘What about your old man’s Number Sixes?’

‘Fraid there weren’t any. Soz.’

‘God! All right. Gi’ us the Woodbines. Taylor, want a smoke?’

Ant Little said, ““Given up”,’ sneerily, ‘ain’t yer, Taylor?’

‘Started up again,’ I told Grant Burch, scrambling up the embankment.

Dean Moran helped me over the muddy lip. ‘All right?’

I told Moran, ‘All right,’ back.

‘Yee-HAAAAAAR!’ Squelch straddled the Hollow Log like a horse and whipped his own bum with a whippy stick. ‘Gonna kick dat boy’s ass to da middle o’next week!’ He must’ve got it off some film.

A middle-ranking kid like me shouldn’t refuse an invitation from an older kid like Grant Burch. I held the Woodbine like my cousin’d shown me, and pretended to take a deep drag. (Actually I kept the smoke in my mouth.) Ant Little was hoping I’d cough my guts up. But I just breathed out the smoke like I’d done it a million times before, and passed the cigarette to Darren Croome. (Why does something as forbidden as smoking taste so foul?) I glanced at Grant Burch to see how impressed he was but he was looking towards the kissing gate over by St Gabriel’s. ‘Look who it flamin’ isn’t.’

The fighters sized each other up in front of the Hollow Log. Grant Burch's got an inch or two over Ross Wilcox, but Ross Wilcox is knucklier. Gary Drake and Wayne Nashend'd come as his lieutenants. Wayne Nashend used to be one of the Upton Punks, briefly became an Upton New Romantic, but now he's firmly an Upton Mod. He's an utter thicko. Gary Drake's no thicko, though. He's in my form at school. But Gary Drake's Ross Wilcox's cousin so they're always dossing about together.

‘Fuck off home to Mummy,’ Grant Burch told Ross Wilcox, ‘while you still can.’ (A dirty opener, that. Everyone knows about Ross Wilcox’s mum.)

Ross Wilcox gobbed at Grant Burch’s feet. ‘Make me fuck off.’

Grant Burch looked at the gob on his trainers. ‘You’re gonna be cleaning that off with your fucking tongue, Piss Flaps.’

‘Make me.’

‘Don’t make shit, it comes natural.’

‘Really original line, that, Burch.’

Hate smells of burnt dead fireworks.

At school, scraps are ace fun. We all scream ‘SCRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAPPP’ and rush to the epicentre. Mr Carver or Mr Whitlock wades in, tossing aside members of the audience. But this morning’s scrap was more cold blooded. My own body flinched under the punches, automatically, like how your leg hoists itself when you’re watching a high-jumper on TV. Grant Burch body-tackled Ross Wilcox low and fast.

Ross Wilcox got in a weak punch, but had to squirm sideways to not get toppled.

Grant Burch clawed at Ross Wilcox’s throat. ‘Cunt!’

Ross Wilcox clawed at Grant Burch’s throat. ‘Cunt yerself!’

Ross Wilcox punched Grant Burch’s head. That hurt.

Grant Burch got Ross Wilcox in a headlock. That really hurt.

Ross Wilcox was swung one way, swung the other, but Grant Burch couldn’t deck him so he punched Ross Wilcox’s face. Ross Wilcox managed to twist his hand up and sink his fingers into Grant Burch’s face.

Grant Burch shoved Ross Wilcox and booted him in the ribs.

Straight away they head-butted each other, like rams.

They grapple-wrapped each other, garking through clenched teeth.

A crimson streak’d appeared from Grant Burch’s nose. It smeared Ross Wilcox’s face.

Ross Wilcox tried to trip Grant Burch.

Grant Burch counter-tripped Ross Wilcox.

Ross Wilcox counter-counter-tripped Grant Burch.

By now, they'd three-legged themselves to the lip of the embankment.

'Watch it!' Gary Drake shouted. 'You're right at the edge!'

Knotted round each other, they teetered, clutched, swayed.

Over they went.

At the foot of the embankment, Ross Wilcox'd already got to his feet. Grant Burch was half sat up, cradling his right hand in his left and squinting with agony. Shit, I thought. Blood and soil clotted Grant Burch's face.

‘Aw,’ mocked Ross Wilcox. ‘Had enough, now, have we?’

‘My wrist’s bust,’ Grant Burch grimaced, ‘yer fuckin’ wanker!’

Ross Wilcox flobbed, dead casual. ‘Looks to me like you’ve lost, then, ain’t yer?’

‘I’ve not fuckin’ lost, yer fuckin’ wanker, it’s a fuckin’ draw!’

Ross Wilcox grinned up at Gary Drake and Wayne Nashend. ‘Grant Piss Flaps Burch calls this a “draw”! Well, let’s carry on with round two, then, shall we, eh? Settle this “draw”, shall we, eh?’

Grant Burch’s only hope was to turn his defeat into an accident. ‘Oh, sure, Wilcox, yeah, with a bust wrist, ’course I will.’

‘Want me to bust yer other wrist, then, do yer?’

‘Oh, that’d be rock hard of yer!’ Grant Burch managed to get up. ‘Phelps! We’re leaving!’

‘Yeah, yeah, off yer go. Home to Mummy.’

Grant Burch didn’t risk saying, At least I’ve got one. Instead, he glared up at his frozen, pale servant. ‘PHELPS! I just told yer, yer deaf-aid, WE’RE LEAVING!’

Philip Phelps jerked into life and slid down the embankment on his arse. But Ross Wilcox blocked his path. ‘Don’t you get tired of that pillock ordering you about, Phil? He doesn’t own yer. You can tell him to fuck off. What’s he going to do?’

Grant Burch yelled, ‘PHELPS! I ain’t tellin’ yer again!’

Phelps thought about it for a moment, I’m sure. But then he dodged round Ross Wilcox and jogged off after his master. With his good hand, Grant Burch flashed Ross Wilcox a ‘V’ over his shoulder.

‘Oy!’ Ross Wilcox picked up a clod of earth. ‘Forgot yer breakfast, yer bumboys!’

Grant Burch must’ve ordered Phelps not to turn round.

The soil-bomb’s trajectory looked perfect.

It was. It exploded on the back of Phelps’s neck.

It'd been a risky fight for Ross Wilcox, but it'd gone brilliantly. Burch's scalp makes Wilcox the hardest kid in the second year. He'll get invited to be a member of Spooks, most like. He settled on his throne on the Hollow Log. Ant Little said, 'I knew you'd have Grant Burch, Ross!'

'Me too,' said Darren Croome. 'We was saying, on our way here.'

Ant Little got out a packet of Number Sixes. 'Smoke?'

Ross Wilcox swiped the entire pack.

Ant Little looked pleased. 'Where'd yer get yer ear-stud put in, Ross?'

'Did it myself. Needle, candle to sterilize it. Hurts like shit but it's a piece o' piss.'

Gary Drake stabbed a Swan Vesta against the bark to light it.

'You two...' Wayne Nashend squinted down at Dean Moran and me. 'You was here with Burch, wasn't yer?'

'I didn't even know about the scrap,' Dean Moran protested. 'I'm off to White Leaved Oak, me. To stay with my gran.'

'Walking?' Ant Little squinted. 'White Leaved Oak's over the Malverns. It'll take ages. Why doesn't yer old man drive yer?'

Moran looked awkward. 'He's ill.'

'He's on another of his benders,' Wayne Nashend said, 'ain't he?'

Moran looked down.

'Then why can't yer mum drive yer?'

'Can't leave my dad, can she?'

‘What about you,’ Gary Drake speaks snakishly, ‘President Jason Taylor of the Grant Burch Arse-Slurpers Association. What are you doing here?’

You can’t just say, ‘I’m out for a walk,’ ’cause walks are gay.

‘Yee-HAAAAAR!’ Squelch straddled a limb of the Hollow Log like a horse and whipped his own bum with a whippy stick. ‘Gonna kick dat boy’s ass to da middle o’ next week!’

‘You,’ Darren Croome flobbed, ‘should be in Little Malvern Loonybin, Squelch.’

‘Well, Taylor?’ Ross Wilcox isn’t so easily distracted.

I spat out my flavourless Juicy Fruit, desperate for a way out. Hangman was gripping the root of my tongue and every letter in the alphabet was a stammer-letter.

‘He’s coming to my nan’s too,’ said Dean Moran.

‘You didn’t tell us that, Taylor,’ accused Ant Little, ‘not before Ross kicked the shit out of that wankstain Burch.’

I managed to say, ‘You didn’t ask, Little.’

‘Me and Taylor were meeting here.’ Moran began heading off. ‘That was the plan all along. He’s comin’ to my nan’s too. C’mon, Jason, better be off now.’

The Christmas tree plantation was dark as eclipses and whiffed of bleach. Armies of them in endless rows and files. Flies, titchy as commas, got into our eyes and nostrils. I should've thanked Moran for the lifeline he'd thrown me back by the Hollow Log, but that would've meant admitting how badly I'd needed it. Instead, I told him about the Dobermanns. But it wasn't news to Moran. 'Oh, Kit Harris? I knows 'im all right. Divorced the same woman, three times. She must need her bloomin' head examinin'. Kit Harris loves one thing only and that's them dogs. He's a teacher, believe it or not.'

'A teacher? But he's a psycho.'

'Yep. At a borstal, out Pershore way. His nickname's "Badger", 'cause o' that streak o' white hair. Not that anyone calls him that to his face. Once one o' the borstal kids took a dump on the bonnet of his car. Guess how Badger found out who done it.'

'How?'

'Squeezing bamboo needles up every kid's fingernails, one by one, till someone grassed on the kid who done it.'

'No way!'

'God's honest, that is. My sister Kelly told me. Discipline's tougher at borstals, that's why they're borstals. At first, Badger tried to get the kid who done it expelled. But the headmaster of the borstal wouldn't do it, 'cause if yer get expelled from a borstal that means automatic prison. So a few weeks later, Badger organized a wide-game on Bredon Hill. At night.'

'What's a wide-game?'

'Like an army game, a war game. They do 'em in the Scouts too. One side has to capture the other side's flag, stuff like that. So anyway, the next morning, the kid who'd crapped on Badger's car'd disappeared.'

‘Where to?’

‘Exactly! The headmaster told Interpol and that, the kid’d run away during the wide-game. Happens all the time at borstals. Kelly got to the bottom of it, though. But you have to swear on your own grave you’ll never tell anyone.’

‘I swear.’

‘On yer own grave.’

‘On my own grave.’

‘Kelly was in Rhydd’s when Badger comes in. This was three weeks after the kid’d disappeared, okay? So. Badger buys bread and stuff. Badger’s just leaving, when Mr Rhydd asks him, “What about your Pedigree Chum for your dogs, Mr Harris?” Badger just says, “My boys’re on a diet, Mr Rhydd.” Dead evil, like that. “My boys’re on a diet.” Then when he’s gone, Kelly overhears Mr Rhydd telling Pete Redmarley’s old biddy that Badger hadn’t bought his usual cans of Pedigree Chum for three weeks.’

‘Uh-huh,’ I said, not quite getting it.

‘Yer don’t need to be Brain of Britain to work out what Badger’s Dobermanns was eating for those three weeks, right?’

‘What?’

‘Badger was feeding his dogs the missing kid!’

‘Jesus,’ I actually shivered, ‘Christ.’

‘So if all Badger did was put the shits up yer,’ Moran slapped my shoulder, ‘yer got off lightly.’

A farty ditch'd flooded the bridlepath and we both took a running jump. My superior athletic powers got me over. Moran soaked one foot up to his ankle.

‘So where were you on yer way to, then, Jace?’

(Hangman blocked ‘Nowhere’.) ‘Just out. For a doss.’

Moran’s trainer squished. ‘Must be heading somewhere.’

‘Well,’ I confessed, ‘I’ve heard the bridlepath might lead to a tunnel, through the Malverns. Thought I might go and take a butcher’s.’

‘The tunnel?’ Moran stopped and sort of slapped my arm in disbelief. ‘That’s where I’m going!’

‘What happened to staying with your nan in White Leaved Oak?’

‘I’m going there by rediscovering the lost tunnel, see? The one the Romans built to invade Hereford.’

‘Romans? Tunnels?’

‘How else could they kick out the blinkin’ Vikings? Done my research, I have, see. Got a torch and a roll of string, and everything. Three tunnels go through the Malverns. One’s the British Rail one for the train to Hereford. It’s haunted by an engineer in orange overalls with a black stripe where the train ran over him. The second tunnel’s a Ministry of Defence tunnel.’

‘A what?’

‘A tunnel the Ministry of Defence dug for a nuclear bomb shelter. The entrance is in the garden centre at Woolworths in Great Malvern. Gospel. One of the garden centre walls is a fake wall what hides a vault door, like in a bank. When the four-minute warning goes off, the Ministry of Defence lot at the RSRE’ll be ferried up to Woolies by the military police. Councillors

from Malvern Council'll be allowed in, so will Woolworths' manager and assistant manager. Then the military police – who've kept out all the panicking shoppers with their guns – they'll be allowed in. They'll grab one or two of the prettier shop assistants for breeding. Which rules my sister out, don't it? Then that door'll close and all of us'll get blown to Kingdom Come.'

'Kelly didn't tell you all this, did she?'

'Nah, the bloke my dad buys horse shit off of for the garden, his mate's the barman at the RSRE.'

It must be true then. 'Jesus.'

In a drift of khaki pine needles I saw antlers, like Herne the Hunter's. But it was only a branch. 'S'pose we may as well join forces,' I said. 'Hunting the third tunnel. The lost one.'

'But,' Moran kicked a pine cone but missed, 'who'll do the interview with the Malvern Gazetteer?'

I booted a pine cone way up the gloomy path. 'Both of us.'

Run across a field of daisies at warp speed but keep your eyes on the ground. It's ace. Petalled stars and dandelion comets streak the green universe. Moran and I got to the barn at the far side, dizzy with intergalactic travel. I was laughing more than Moran 'cause Moran's dry trainer wasn't dry any more, it was glistening in cow shit. Bales of straw made a ramp up to the griddly barn roof, so up we climbed. The cockerel tree you can see from my bedroom wasn't running left to right now, it was running right to left. 'Skill place for a machine-gun nest, this barn,' I said, displaying my military expertise.

Moran squidged off his shitty trainer and lay back.

I lay back, too. The rusty iron was warm as a hotty.

'This is the life,' sighed Moran, after a bit.

'You can say that again,' I said, after a bit.

'This is the life,' said Moran, straight off.

I knew he would. 'That's so original.'

Sheep and lambs were bleating, fields behind us.

A tractor was chuntering, fields ahead.

'Does your old man ever get pissed?' Moran asked.

If I said yes I'd be lying, but if I said no it'd look gay. 'He has a drink or two, when my Uncle Brian visits.'

'Not a drink or two. I mean does he get so fucking plastered he...he can hardly speak?'

'No.'

That No turned the three feet between into three miles.

‘No.’ Moran’d shut his eyes. ‘Don’t look the type, your dad.’

‘But yours doesn’t, either. He’s really friendly and funny...’

An aeroplane glinted, mercury bright in the dark high blue.

‘Maxine calls it like this, she calls it “Daddy’s going dark”. She’s right. He goes dark. He starts...y’know, on a few cans, and gets loud and makes shite jokes we have to laugh at. Shouts and stuff. The neighbours bang on the wall to complain. Dad bangs back, calls ’em all the names under the sun...then he locks himself in his room but he’s got bottles in there. We hear them smash. One by one. Then he sleeps it off. Then afterwards, when he’s all so sorry, it’s all, “Oh, I’m never touchin’ the stuff again...” That’s almost worse...Tell you what it’s like, it’s like this whiny shitty nasty weepy man who isn’t my dad takes my dad over for however long the bender lasts, but only I – and Mum and Kelly and Sally and Max – know that it isn’t him. The rest of the world doesn’t know that, see. They just say, Frank Moran showing his true colours, that is. But it ain’t.’ Moran twisted his head at me. ‘But it is. But it ain’t. But it is. But it ain’t. Oh, how am I s’posed to know?’

A painful minute went by.

Green is made of yellow and blue, nothing else, but when you look at green, where’ve the yellow and the blue gone? Somehow this is to do with Moran’s dad. Somehow this is to do with everyone and everything. But too many things’d’ve gone wrong if I’d tried to say this to Moran.

Moran sniffed, ‘Fancy a nice, cool bottle of Woodpecker?’

‘Cider? You’ve brought cider?’

‘No. My dad drunk ’em all. But,’ Moran fumbled in his bag, ‘I’ve got a can of Irn Bru.’

Irn Bru’s fizzy liquid bubblegum, but I said, ‘Sure,’ ’cause I hadn’t brought any drink myself and Irn Bru’s better than nothing. I’d imagined I

could drink from fresh springs but the only water I'd seen so far was that farty ditch.

The Irn Bru exploded in Moran's hand like a grenade. 'Shit!'

'Watch out with that Irn Bru. It'll be all shaken up.'

'You don't flamin' say so!' Moran gave me first swig, as he licked his hand clean. In return, I gave him some Cadbury's Caramel. It'd oozed out of its wrapper, but we picked off the bits of pocket fluff and it tasted okay. I got a hayfever attack and sneezed ten or twenty times into a nuggety hanky.

A vapour trail gashed the sky.

But the sky healed itself. Without fuss.

CRAAAAAAWWWKKK!

I'd slid halfway down the curve of the barn roof, clattering between dreaming and waking, before I got my balance back.

Three monster crows sat in a row, where Moran had last been.

Of Moran there was no sign.

The crows' beaks were daggers. Their oily eyes had cruel plans.

'Piss off!'

Crows know when they're a match for you.

St Gabriel's bell rang eleven or twelve times, the crows made me too uneasy to keep count. Tiny darts of water hit my face and neck. The weather had turned while I'd been sleeping. The Malverns'd disappeared behind wings of rain, beating just fields away. The crows parascended up and off.

Moran wasn't inside the barn, either. Obviously he'd decided not to share the front page of the Malvern Gazetteer. What a traitor! But if he wanted to play Scott of the Antarctic versus Amundsen the Norwegian, that was fine by me. Moran's never beaten me at anything in his life.

The barn smelt of armpits, hay and piss.

Rain began its blitz, tranging bullets off the roof and strafing the puddles round the barn. (Serve Moran the Deserter right if he got a drenching and caught pneumonia.) Rain erased the twentieth century. Rain turned the world to whites and greys.

Over the sleeping giant of the Malvern Hills, a double rainbow linked the Worcestershire Beacon with the British Camp. Ancient Britons got massacred by the Romans there. The melony sun dripped steamy brightness. I set off at a fast yomp, jogging fifty, walking fifty. I decided, if I passed Moran, I wouldn't say a word to him. Cut the traitor dead. The wet turf squeaked beneath my trainers. I climbed a shaky gate and crossed a paddock with jumps for horses made from police cones and stripey poles. Past the paddock was a farmyard. Two silage towers shone like Victorian Apollo spacecraft. Trombone flowers snaked up trellises and a flaky sign read, HORSE MANURE FOR SALE. A cocky rooster eyed its hens. Rain-soggy sheets and white pillowcases hung on a washing line. Frilly panties and bras too. A mossy track disappeared over the rise, towards the main road to Malvern. Passing a stable, I peered into the hot, manure-reeky dark.

Three horses, I made out. One tossed its head, one snorted, one stared at me. I hurried on. If a bridlepath goes through a farmyard it can't be private but farmyards definitely don't feel public. I'm afraid of hearing Trespasser! I'm going to give you a prosecutin' you'll never forget! (I used to think trespassing was about Heaven and Hell, because of the Lord's Prayer.)

So anyway, over the next gate was this medium-sized field. A John Deere tractor was ploughing it into slimy furrows. Seagulls hovered behind the plough, plucking easy fat worms. I hid till the tractor was headed away from the bridlepath.

Then I began legging it across, like an SAS agent.

‘TAYLOR!’

I’d got noosed before I’d even reached a sprint.

Dawn Madden sat in the cockpit of an ancient tractor, whittling a stick. She wore a bomber jacket and mud-starred Doc Martens with red laces.

I steadied my breath. ‘All right’ (I meant to call her ‘Madden’ ’cause she’d called me ‘Taylor’) ‘Dawn.’

‘Where’s,’ her knife shaved stringy loops of wood, ‘the fire?’

‘Huh?’

Dawn Madden mimicked my Huh? ‘Why’re you running?’

Her oil-black hair’s sort of punky. She must use gel. I’d love to gel her gel in for her. ‘I like to run. Sometimes. Just because.’

‘Oh, aye? And what brings you so far up the bridlepath, then?’

‘No reason. I’m just out. For a doss.’

‘Then,’ she pointed to the bonnet of the tractor, ‘you can doss there.’

I badly wanted to obey her. ‘Why?’ I badly didn’t want to obey her.

Her lipstick was Fruit Gum redcurrant. ‘Cause I’m telling you to.’

‘So,’ I scrambled up the front tyre, ‘what are you doing here?’

‘I do live here, y’know.’

The wet bonnet of the tractor made my arse wet. ‘That farmhouse? Back there?’

Dawn Madden unzipped her bomber jacket. ‘That farmhouse. Back there.’ Her crucifix was chunky and black like a Goth’s and nestled between her subtle breasts.

‘Thought you lived in that house by the pub.’

‘Used to. Too noisy. And Isaac Pye, the landlord, he’s a total slimeball. Not that he,’ Dawn Madden nodded at the tractor ploughing the field, ‘is much of an improvement.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘Official stepfather. That house is his house. Don’t you know anything, Taylor? Mum and I live there now. They got married last year.’

Actually now I remembered. ‘What’s he like?’

‘Brains of a bull.’ She peered at me round an invisible curtain. ‘Not only the brains, judging by the racket they make some nights.’ Stewy air stroked Dawn Madden’s milk-chocolate throat.

‘Are those ponies in the stable yours?’

‘Have a good snoop round, did we?’

Her stepfather’s tractor was heading back this way.

‘I only looked into the stable. Honest.’

She got back to her knife and stick. ‘Horses cost a fortune to keep.’ Whittle, whittle, whittle. ‘That man’s letting the riding school keep them there while they’re doing some rebuilding. Anything else you want to know?’

Oh, five hundred things. ‘What are you making?’

‘An arrow.’

‘What do you want an arrow for?’

‘To go with my bow.’

‘What do you want a bow and arrow for?’

‘What-what-what, what-what-what-what?’ (For one horrifying moment I thought she was taking the piss out of my stammer but I think it was more general.) ‘All questions with you, ain’t it, Taylor? My bow and arrow’s to hunt boys and kill them. The world’s better off without them. Spurty scum, that’s what little boys are made of.’

‘Gee, thanks.’

‘You’re welcome.’

‘Can I see your knife?’

Dawn Madden tossed her knife, right at me. It was sheer fluke that it was the blade’s handle that hit my rib and not its fang.

‘Madden!’

Her stare said What? Dawn Madden’s eyes are dark honey.

‘That could’ve stuck right into me!’

Dawn Madden’s eyes are dark honey. ‘Oh, poor Taylor.’

The clackering tractor reached us and began a slow turn. Dawn Madden’s stepfather beamed hate-rays my way. Rusty earth sluiced round the blades of the plough.

Dawn Madden did a spazzo yokel voice at the tractor. ““Made o’ moy flesh an’ blood or not, young missy, we’re going to have more respect in this ’ouse or you’ll be out on your bony arse an’ don’t you go thinkin’ Oi’m bluffin’ yer ’cause I never bluff no one!””

Her knife’s handle was warm and sticky from her grip. The blade was sharp enough to hack off a limb. ‘Nice knife.’

Dawn Madden asked, ‘Hungry?’

‘Depends.’

‘Picky.’ Dawn Madden unpeeled a squashed Danish pastry from a paper bag. ‘Won’t turn your snout up at a bit of this, though, right?’ The girl tore a bit off and waved it at me.

Its icing glistened. ‘Okay, then.’

‘Here, Taylor! Here, doggy! Come! Good boy!’

I crawled over the bonnet towards her, on all fours. Not doggily, but carefully, in case she swatted me into the nettles. You never know with Dawn Madden. As she leant towards me I saw the bumplets of her nipples. No bra. My hand moved towards her.

‘Paws down! In your teeth, doggy!’

She fed me like that. Arrow to mouth.

Lemony icing, cinnamony dough, raisins sweet and sharp.

Dawn Madden ate too. I saw the cud pulp on her tongue. Closer now, on her crucifix I saw a skinny Jesus. Jesus’d be warmed by her body. Lucky guy. Pretty soon the Danish was all gone. Delicately, she spiked the cherry on the tip of her arrow. Delicately, I lifted it off with my teeth.

The sun went in.

‘Taylor!’ Dawn Madden peered at her arrow’s tip. Her voice went furious. ‘You stole my cherry!’

It stuck in my throat. ‘You...gave it me.’

‘You stole my fucking cherry and now you’ve got to pay for it!’

‘Dawn, you—’

‘Since when’ve you been allowed to call me Dawn?’

The same game, a different game, or no game?

She pricked my Adam’s apple with her arrow. Dawn Madden leaned in so close I could smell the sugar on her breath. ‘Do I look like I’m joking, Jason Taylor?’

That arrow was really sharp. I probably could’ve swatted it off before she could puncture my windpipe. Probably. But it wasn’t that simple. For one thing, I had a boner as big as a Dobermann.

‘You’ve got to pay for what you’ve taken. That’s the law.’

‘I don’t have any money.’

‘Then think hard, Taylor. How else can you pay me?’

‘I—’ One dimple. Tiny hairs velvet the groove above her lip. Imp’s nose. Petalled lips. Hook smile. A reflected pair of me looking out from her bad-doe eyes. ‘I...I’ve got a pack of fruit Polos in my pocket. But they’re all glued together. You’d have to smash them with a rock.’

A spell broke. The arrow fell from my throat.

Dawn Madden climbed back into the tractor’s driving seat, bored.

‘What?’

Her answer was this disgusted gaze like I’d turned into a pair of flares on a reject rack in Tewkesbury Market.

I wanted the arrow back, now. ‘What?’

‘If you’re not off our land by the time I count to twenty,’ Dawn Madden crumpled a stick of Wrigley’s Spearmint into her beautiful mouth, ‘I’ll tell my stepfather you groped me. If you’re not off by the time I count to thirty, I’ll tell him you,’ her tongue licked the word, ‘touched me up. Swear to God.’

‘But I never touched you!’

‘My stepfather keeps a shotgun above the kitchen dresser. He might mistake you for a wickle fwuffy wabbit, Taylor. One – two – three—’

The bridlepath wandered into this once-upon-a-time orchard. Brittle thistles and fluffy grass'd grown elbow high so you waded rather than walked. I was still thinking about Dawn Madden. I didn't understand. She must sort of fancy me. She wouldn't've given her only Danish pastry to just any kid who happened along. And I sure as hell fancied Dawn Madden. Fancying girls's dangerous, though. Not dangerous, but not simple. It can be dangerous. Kids at school rip the piss out of you, at first. 'Ooh, a baby's on its way,' they say, if they see you holding hands in the corridor. Boys who fancy the girl might pick a scrap with you to show her she's going out with a squirt. Then, once you're an official couple like Lee Biggs and Michelle Tirley, you've got to endure her friends writing both your initials plus '4 EVER' in arrowed hearts all over their rough books. Teachers join in. When Mr Whitlock was doing hermaphroditic reproduction in worms last term, he called one worm 'Worm Lee' and the other 'Worm Michelle'. Us boys thought it was a bit funny but the girls screamed with laughter like the TV audience on Happy Days. 'Cept for Michelle Tirley herself, who turned beetroot, hid her face in her hands and wept. Mr Whitlock took the piss out of her for that, too.

There're gaps between me and Dawn Madden. Kingfisher Meadows's the poshest estate in Black Swan Green, most kids reckon. Her stepfather's farmhouse is the opposite of posh. I'm in 2KM, the top class at school. She's in 2LP, second from bottom. These gaps aren't easy to ignore. There are rules.

Then there's sexual intercourse. You don't do it in biology till the third year. A diagram in a textbook of an erect penis in a vagina is one thing, but actually doing it, that's another. The only actual vagina I've seen was on a greasy photo Neal Brose charged us 5p to look at. It was a baby kangaroo-prawn in its mother's hairy pouch. I almost vommed up my Mars Bar and Outer Spacers.

I've never even kissed anyone.

Dawn Madden's eyes are dark honey.

A conker tree'd erupted out of the earth and'd flexed out millions of strong arms and strong legs. Someone'd hung a tyre-swing off one bough. The tyre spun gently as the Earth spun under it. Rainwater'd pooled inside but I tipped it out and had a go. Weightlessness orbiting Alpha Centauri'd be best, but weightlessness on a swing isn't bad. If Moran'd been there too it'd've been an ace laugh. After a bit I shimmied up the frayed rope to

see how climbable the tree was. Once you were up, it was dead climbable. I even found the ruins of a tree house. Donkey's yonks'd gone by since it'd seen active service, mind. Higher up, I crawled along a branch and peered out of the green bell. You could see for miles. Back towards Black Swan Green, Dawn Madden's farm silos, a spiral staircase of smoke, the Christmas tree plantation, St Gabriel's spire and its two nearly-as-tall redwoods.

With my Swiss Army knife I carved this in the ribbly bark.



The sap on my blade smelt green. Miss Throckmorton used to tell us that people who carve things on trees are the wickedest sorts of vandals 'cause they're not only making graffiti, they're hurting living beings too. Miss Throckmorton might be right but she can't've ever been a thirteen-year-old boy who met a girl like Dawn Madden. One day, I thought, I'll bring her up to show her this. I'd do my first kiss with her. Right here. She'd touch me. Right here.

Round the other side of the conker tree, I looked at what lay up the bridlepath. A lane snaking to Marl Bank and Castlemorton, fields, more fields, a glimpse of an old grey turret rising above the firs. Line of pylons. You could pick out details on the Malvern Hills now. Sun flashed off cars on the Wells Road. Termite-sized walkers crossing Perserverance Hill. Underneath, somewhere, ran the third tunnel. I ate my block of Wensleydale and broken Jacobs crackers, wishing I'd brought some water. I climbed back to the tyre-swing rope and was just about to shimmy down when I heard a man's voice and a woman's voice.

‘See?’ Tom Yew, I recognized straight off. ‘Told you it was just a bit farther.’

‘Yeah, Tom,’ answered the woman, ‘about twenty times.’

‘You said you wanted somewhere private.’

‘I didn’t mean halfway to Wales.’ Now I saw Debby Crombie. Debby Crombie I’ve never spoken to, but Tom Yew’s Nick Yew’s older brother, on leave from the Royal Navy. I could’ve just called out ‘Hi!’ and come down the rope and it’d’ve been fine. But being invisible was fun. I retreated back along the bough to a fork in the trunk and waited till they’d gone.

But they didn’t go. ‘This is it.’ Tom Yew stopped right by the swing. ‘The Yew Boys’ Very Own Horse Chestnut Tree.’

‘Won’t there be ants and bees and things here?’

‘It’s called “nature”, Debs. You get it a lot in the countryside.’

Debby Crombie unspread a rug in a dell between two roots.

Even now I could’ve (should’ve) let them know I was there.

I tried to. But before I’d worked out an excuse without a stammer-word, Tom Yew and Debby Crombie’d lain down on the rug and started snogging. His fingers undid the buttons up her lavender dress, one at a time, from her knees to her sunburnt neck.

If I said anything now, I’d be dead meat.

The conker tree swished, creaked and rocked.

Debby Crombie stuck her finger into Tom Yew’s fly and murmured, ‘Hello, sailor.’ That made them giggle so much they had to stop snogging.

Tom Yew reached for his backpack, got out two bottles of beer, and flipped off their caps with his Swiss Army knife. (Mine's red. His is black.)

They clinked bottles. Tom Yew said, ‘Here’s to...’

‘...me, gorgeous me.’

‘Me, wonderful me.’

‘I said it first.’

‘Okay. You.’

They swigged their brown beery sunshine.

‘And,’ Debby Crombie added, seriously, ‘a safe tour of duty.’

“Course it’s safe, Debs! Five months cruising round the Adriatic, the Aegean, the Suez and the Gulf? Worst that’ll happen to me is sunburn.’

‘Ah, but once you’re on board the Coventry,’ Debby Crombie pouted, or pretended to, ‘you’ll forget all about your pining sweetheart back in boring old Worcestershire. You’ll go out on the razz in Athens and pick up VD from some floozy Greek temptress called...’

‘Called what?’

‘...Iannos.’

““Iannos” is a boy’s name. It’s Greek for “John”.’

‘Yeah, but you’d only find that out after he’d filled you full of ouzo and strapped you to his bed frame.’

Tom Yew lay back grinning and looked up straight at me.

Thank God he wasn’t looking at what he was looking at. Cobras can spot prey move from half a mile away. But if you don’t move a muscle, they can’t see you, even from five feet. It was that that saved me this afternoon.

‘Used to climb this very tree, y’know, when Nick was a wee nipper. One summer, we built a tree house. Wonder if it’s still up there...’

Debby Crombie was already stroking his groin. ‘Nothing wee about this nipper, Thomas William Yew.’ Debby Crombie unpeeled Tom Yew’s Harley Davidson T-shirt and flung it away. His back’s glazed and muscly like Action Man’s. He’s got a blue swordfish tattooed on one shoulder.

She squirmed out of her unbuttoned lavender dress.

If Dawn Madden’s breasts were a pair of Danishes, Debby Crombie’s got two Space Hoppers. Each armed with a gribbly nipple. Tom Yew kissed them in turn and his saliva glistened in the April sun. I know watching was wrong but I couldn’t not. Tom Yew slipped off her red panties and stroked the cressy hair there.

‘If you want me to stop, Madam Crombie, you have to say now.’

‘Oooh, Master Yew,’ she croodled, ‘don’t you dare.’

Tom Yew got on her and sort of jiggled there and she gasped like he was giving her a Chinese burn and wrapped her legs round him, froggily. Now he moved up and down, Man-from-Atlantisly. His silver chain jiggled on his neck.

Now her grubby soles met like they were praying.

Now his skin was glazed in roast pork sweat.

Now she made a noise like a tortured Moomintroll.

Now Tom Yew’s body jerkjerked judderily jackknifed and a noise like a ripping cable tore out of him. Once more, like he’d been booted in the balls.

Her fingernails’d sunk salmony welts into his arse.

Debby Crombie’s mouth made a perfect O.

A chime from St Gabriel's for one o'clock, or maybe two, eddied this far. Moran the Deserter'd be miles up the bridlepath by now. My only hope was if he got his leg caught in a rusty badger trap. He'd beg me to go and get help. I'd say, 'Well, Moran, why don't I think about it?'

Debby Crombie and Tom Yew still hadn't unglued themselves. She was just drowsing, but Tom Yew was snoring. A Red Admiral fluttered on to the small of his back to drink from the puddle of sweat there.

I felt hungry and nervy and sick and jealous and sluggy and shamed and many things. Not proud and not pleased and not like I ever wanted to do that. The noises they'd made weren't quite human. The breeze lullabied the conker tree and the conker tree lullabied me.

‘GaaaAAA!’ Tom Yew shouted. ‘FAAAAAAAA!’

Debby Crombie shrieked too. Her eyes were open and white.

He’d jumped off her and’d fallen on to his side.

‘Tom! Tom! It’s okay it’s okay it’s OKAY!’

‘Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.’

‘Darling! It’s Debs! It’s okay! It’s a nightmare! Only a nightmare!’

Nuddy sunbaked Tom Yew shut his scared eyes, nodded that he understood, crouched against a tentacle-root and gripped his throat. That shout must’ve torn his vocal cords.

‘It’s all right.’ Debby Crombie shuffled her lavender dress on and hugged Tom Yew like a mother. ‘Darling, you’re trembling! Put some clothes on. It’s all right now.’

‘Debs, I’m sorry.’ His voice was crumpled. ‘Must’ve scared you.’

She spread his shirt over his shoulders. ‘What was it, Tom?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Oh, like hell it was nothing. Tell me!’

‘I was on the Coventry. There was enemy fire...’

‘Go on. Go on.’

Tom Yew clenched his eyes shut and shook his head.

‘Go on, Tom!’

‘No more, Debs. It was too...too fucking real.’

‘But Tom. I love you. I want to know.’

‘Yeah, and I love you too much to tell you and that’s that. C’mon on. Let’s get back to the village. Before some kid sees us.’

Cauliflowers grew in neat rows between pointy ridges. I was halfway across when the planes came roaring, demolishing the sky over the Severn Valley. Tornados fly over our school several times a day, so I was ready to cover my ears with my hands. But I wasn't ready for three Hawker Harrier Jump Jets, close enough to the ground to hit with a cricket ball. The slam of noise was incredible! I bent into a tight ball and peeped out. The Harriers curved before they smashed into the Malverns, just, and flew off towards Birmingham, screaming under Soviet radar height. When World War III comes, it'll be MiGs stationed in Warsaw or East Germany screaming under NATO radar. Dropping bombs on people like us. On English cities, towns and villages like Worcester, Malvern and Black Swan Green.

Dresden, the Blitz and Nagasaki.

I stayed curled up till the roar of the Harriers finally sank under the hum of distant cars and nearby trees. The earth's a door, if you press your ear against it. Mrs Thatcher was on TV yesterday talking to a bunch of schoolkids about cruise missiles. 'The only way to stop a playground bully,' she said, as sure of her truth as the blue of her eyes, 'is to show to the bully that if he thumps you, then you can jolly well thump him back a lot harder!'

But the threat of being thumped back never stopped Ross Wilcox and Grant Burch scrapping, did it?

I brushed straw and dirt off me, and carried on walking till I came to an old-style bath tub in the corner of the next field. From all the hoofed-up mud, I guessed it was used as a feeding trough. In the tub a giant fertilizer bag was covering something. Curious, I pulled the fertilizer bag away.

Here was the dirt-smeared corpse of a boy my age.

This corpse then sat up and lunged at my throat.

'AHSES TO ASHES!' it gibbered. 'DUST TO DUST!'

One whole minute later, Dean Moran was still pissing his pants. ‘Should o’ seen yer face!’ he wheezed through his laughter. ‘Should o’ seen it!’

‘Okay, okay,’ I said, yet again. ‘Congratulations. You’re a genius.’

‘Looked like you cacked yer cacks!’

‘Yeah, Moran. You got me really well. Okay.’

‘Best April Fool I ever done!’

‘So why did you bugger off? I thought we were s’posed to be looking for the tunnel together?’

Moran calmed down. ‘Ah, y’know...’

‘No. I don’t. Thought we had a deal.’

‘I didn’t want to wake you up,’ Moran said, awkwardly.

This is about his dad, said Unborn Twin.

Moran’d saved me from Gary Drake, so I let it go. ‘So are you still on for it? The tunnel? Or are you going to sneak off again on a solo run?’

‘I waited here for yer to catch us up, didn’t I?’

The unused field had a scrubby rise hiding its far side. ‘You’ll never guess who I saw back there,’ I began telling Moran.

Moran answered, ‘Dawn Madden, on a tractor.’

Oh. ‘You saw her too?’

‘Flamin’ nutcase, is that girl. Made me climb up her tractor.’

‘Did she?’

‘Yeah! Made me arm-wrestle her. My Danish for her knife.’

‘Who won?’

‘I did! She’s only a girl! But then she took my Danish anyway. Told me to bugger off her stepfather’s land or she’d get him to turn his shotgun on me. Flamin’ nutcase, that girl.’

Say if you hunt for Christmas presents in mid-December, find what you’re hoping to get, but then on Christmas Day there’s no sign of it in your pillowcase. That’s how I felt. ‘Well, I saw something better than Dawn Madden on a tractor, any day of the week.’

‘Oh aye?’

‘Tom Yew and Debby Crombie.’

‘Don’t tell me!’ Moran’s got toothy gaps. ‘She got her tits out?’

‘Well—’

The chain of gossip laid itself out link by link. I’d tell Moran. Moran’d tell his sister Kelly. Kelly’d tell Pete Redmarley’s sister Ruth. Ruth Redmarley’d tell Pete Redmarley. Pete Redmarley’d tell Nick Yew. Nick Yew’d tell Tom Yew. Tom Yew’d come round to my house this evening on his Suzuki 150cc, tie me in a sack, and drown me in the lake in the woods.

““Well” what?’

‘Actually, they just snogged.’

‘Should’ve sticked around, yer should’ve.’ Moran performed his tongue-up-his-nose trick. ‘Might’ve seen a bit o’ crump.’

Bluebells swarmed in pools of light where the sun got through the trees. The air smelt of them. Wild garlic smelt of toasted phlegm. Blackbirds sang like they'd die if they didn't. Birdsong's the thoughts of a wood. Beautiful, it was, but boys aren't allowed to say 'beautiful' 'cause it's the gayest word going. The bridlepath narrowed to single file. I let Moran go ahead as a body shield. (I didn't read Warlord for all those years without learning something about survival techniques.) So when Moran suddenly stopped I walked smack into him.

Moran had his finger on his lip. Here was a pruney man in a turquoise smock, about twenty paces up the bridlepath. The pruney man gazed up from the bottom of a well of brightness and buzzing that, we saw, was made of bees.

'What's he doing?' whispered Moran.

Praying, I nearly said. 'No idea.'

'A wild hive,' Moran whispered, 'above him. On that oak. See it?'

I didn't. 'Is he a beekeeper, d'you reckon?'

Moran didn't answer at first. The bee man didn't have a beekeeper's mask, though bees coated his smock and face. Just watching made my skin itch and twitch. His scalp'd been shaved and had sort of socket-scars. His torn shoes were more like slippers. 'Dunno. Think we can get past him?'

'S'pose,' I remembered a horror film about bees, 'they swarm?'

This half-path snaked off the bridlepath right where we were. Moran and I both had the same idea. Moran went first, which isn't as brave as it looks when the danger's behind you. And after a couple of twists and turns he spun around, anxious, and hissed, 'Listen!'

Bees? Footsteps? Growing louder?

Definitely!

We ran for our lives, crashing through wave after wave of waxy leaves and clawed holly. The rooty ground rocked and tilted and rose and fell.

In a boggy pocket smothered by drapes of ivy and mistletoe, me and Moran collapsed, too knackered to take another step. I didn't like it there. A strangler'd take someone there to strangle and bury, it was that sort of edgy hollow. Me and Moran listened for sounds of pursuit. It's hard to hold your breath when you've got a stitch.

But the bees weren't following us. Neither was the bee man.

Maybe it'd just been the wood, scaring us for its own amusement.

Moran snorted the phlegm back from his nose and swallowed it. 'Reckon we lost him.'

'Reckon so. But where's the bridlepath gone?'

Squeezing through a missing slat in a mossy fence, we found ourselves at the bottom of a lumpy lawn. Molehills mounded up here and there. A big, silent mansion with turrety things watched us from the top of the slope. A peardrop sun dissolved in a sloped pond. Superheated flies grand-prixed over the water. Trees at the height of their blossom bubbled dark cream by a rotted bandstand. On a sort of terrace running round the mansion were jugs of lemon and orange squash just left there, on trestle tables. As we watched, the breeze flicked over a leaning tower of paper cups. Some bowled across the lawn in our direction. Not a soul moved.

Not a soul.

‘God,’ I said to Moran, ‘I’d die for a cup of that squash.’

‘Me too. Must be a spring fête or somethin’.’

‘Yeah, but where’re all the people?’ My mouth was salty and crusted as crisps. ‘It can’t’ve started yet. Let’s just go and help ourselves. If someone sees us we can act like we were going to pay. It’ll only be two pence or five pence.’

Moran didn’t like the plan either. ‘Okay.’

But we were so parched. ‘Come on, then.’

Druggy pom-pom bees hovered in the lavender.

‘Quiet, ain’t it?’ Moran’s murmur was too loud.

‘Yeah.’ Where were the fête stalls? The spinning wheel to win Pomagne? The eggshell-in-sand-tray treasure hunt? The lob-the-pingpong-ball-into-the-wineglass stall?

Up close, the mansion windows showed us nothing but ourselves in the mirrored garden. The jug of orange squash had ants drowning so Moran held the paper cups while I poured the lemon. The jug weighed a ton and its

ice cubes clinked. It freezed my hands. There're tons of stories where bad things happen to strangers who help themselves to food and drink.

‘Cheers.’ Moran and I pretended to clink our cups before we drank.

The squash turned my mouth cold and wet as December and my body went, Ah.

The mansion cracked its sides open and men and women spilt through the doors after their own babble. Already our escape route was being cut off. Most of the mansion were dressed in turquoise smocks, same as the bee man. Some crunched-up ones were being pushed in wheelchairs by nurses in nurse uniforms. Others moved by themselves, but jerkily, like broken robots.

With a shudder of horror, I got it.

‘Little Malvern Loonybin!’ I hissed at Moran.

But Moran wasn’t next to me. I just glimpsed him, across the lawn, as he squeezed back through the missing slat. Maybe he thought I was right behind him, or maybe he’d left me in the lurch. But if I tried to scarper and got caught, it’d mean we’d nicked the squash. Mum and Dad’d be told I was a thief. Even if I didn’t get caught, they might send men with dogs after us.

So I had no choice. I had to stay to find someone to pay.

‘Augustin Moans has run away!’ A nurse with broomy hair ran slap bang into me. ‘The soup was piping hot, but he couldn’t be found!’

‘Are you talking about,’ I swallowed, ‘the man in the woods? The man with the bees? He’s over there,’ I gestured in the right direction, ‘back on the bridlepath. I can show you if you want.’

‘Augustin Moans!’ Now she looked at me properly. ‘How could you?’

‘No, you’re mistaking me for someone else. My’ (Hangman stopped me saying ‘name’) ‘I’m called Jason.’

‘Do you think I’m one of the crazy ones? I know exactly who you are! You, who ran off on your infantile quest, the very day after our wedding! For that idiot Ganache! For a playground promise! You swore you’d loved

me! But then you hear an owl hoot in the firs so off you go, leaving me with child and – and – and—'

I backed off. 'I can pay for the squash, if...'

'No you don't! Look!' This nightmarish nurse clasped my arm, tight. 'Consequences!' The woman shoved her wrist in my face. 'Consequences!' Hideous scars, really hideous scars, criss-crossed the veins. 'Is this love? Is this cherish, honour and obey?' Her words spattered spittle on my face so I shut my eyes and looked away. 'What – gave – you – the right – to inflict this – on anyone?'

'Rosemary!' Another nurse walked up. 'Rosemary! I've told you about borrowing our uniforms a hundred times if I've told you once, haven't I?' She had a reassuring Scottish accent. 'Haven't I?' She gave me a calm nod. 'He's a bit young for you, Rosemary, and I doubt he's on our official guest list.'

'And I've told you,' Rosemary snapped, 'ten thousand times if I've told you never. My name is Yvonne! I am Yvonne de Galais!' This real live lunatic of Little Malvern Towers turned back to me. 'Listen to me.' Rosemary's breath was Dettol and lamb. 'There's no such thing as something! Why? Because everything's already turning into something else!'

'Come on now,' the real nurse coaxed Rosemary like you'd coax a scared horse. 'Let the laddie loose now, shall we? Or shall we have to call the big fellas? Shall we, Rosemary?'

I don't know what I expected to happen next, but it wasn't this. Up wells a wail from inside Rosemary, cracking her jaw open, wider and louder than any human cry I've ever heard ever, rising like a police siren, but much slower and so much sadder. Instantly, every nutter, nurse and doctor on the lawn stands still, turned into statues. Rosemary's wail climbs blastier, scorchier, lonelier. People'll be hearing it a mile away, two miles most like. Who is she howling for? For Grant Burch and his broken wrist. For Mr Castle's wife and her huddled Nerves. For Moran's dad on his poison bender. For that borstal kid Badger fed to his dogs. For Squelch, who came out of his mum too soon. For the bluebells the summer'll demolish. And even if you'd torn through massy brambles, clawed loose crumbly bricks and'd clambered into the lost tunnel, in that booming hollowness, deep beneath the Malvern Hills, even there, for sure, this tail-chasing wail'd find you, absolutely, even there.

Rocks

Nobody can believe it.

The newspapers weren't allowed to say which of our warships'd been hit at first, 'cause of the Official Secrets Act. But now it's on BBC and ITV. HMS Sheffield. An Exocet missile from a Super Étendard smashed into the frigate and 'caused an unconfirmed number of serious explosions'. Mum, Dad, Julia and me all sat in the living room together (for the first time in ages), watching the box in silence. There was no film of a battle. Just a mucky photo of the ship belching smoke while Brian Hanrahan described how survivors were rescued by HMS Arrow or Sea King helicopters. The Sheffield hasn't sunk yet but in the South Atlantic winter it's just a matter of time. Forty of our men are still missing, and at least that many're badly burnt. We keep thinking about Tom Yew on HMS Coventry. Terrible to

admit it, but everyone in Black Swan Green felt relief that it was only the Sheffield. This is horrible. Till today, the Falklands's been like the World Cup. Argentina's got a strong football team, but in army terms they're only a corned-beef republic. Just watching the task force leave Plymouth and Portsmouth three weeks ago it was obvious, Great Britain was going to thrash them. Brass bands on the quayside and women waving and a hundred thousand yachts and honkers and arcs of water from the fire-ships. We had the HMS Hermes, HMS Invincible, HMS Illustrious, the SAS, the SBS. Pumas, Rapiers, Sidewinders, Lynxes, Sea Skuas, Tigerfish torpedoes, Admiral Sandy Woodward. The Argie ships are tubs named after Spanish generals with stupid moustaches. Alexander Haig couldn't admit it in public in case the Soviet Union sided with Argentina, but even Ronald Reagan was on our side.

But now, we might actually lose.

Our Foreign Office've been trying to restart negotiations, but the junta are telling us to get stuffed. We'll run out of ships before they run out of Exocets. That's what they're gambling on. Who's to say they're wrong? Outside Leopoldo Galtieri's palace in Buenos Aires, thousands of people are chanting, 'We feel your greatness!' over and over. The noise is stopping me sleeping. Galtieri stands on the balcony and breathes it in. Some young men jeered at our cameras. 'Give up! Go home! England is sick! England is dying! History says the Malvinas are Argentina's!'

'Pack of hyenas,' Dad remarked. 'The British'd show a bit of decorum. People have been killed, for heaven's sake! That's the difference between us. Will you just look at them!'

Dad went to bed. He's sleeping in the spare room at the moment, 'cause of his back, though Mum told me it's 'cause he tosses and turns so much. It's probably both. They had a right barney this evening, actually over the dinner table. With me and Julia both there.

'I've been thinking—' Mum began.

'Steady now,' Dad interrupted, jokily, like he used to.

'—now's rather a good time to build that rockery.'

'That whattery?'

'The rockery, Michael.'

'You've already got your shiny new Lorenzo Hussiantree kitchen.' Dad used his Be reasonable voice. 'Why do you need a mound of dirt with rocks on?'

'Nobody's talking about a mound of dirt. Rockeries are made of rocks. And a water feature, I was thinking of.'

'What,' Dad did a fake laugh, 'is a "water feature" when it's at home?'

'An ornamental pond. A fountain or miniature cascade, perhaps.'

'Oh.' Dad made a Fancy that noise.

'We've been talking about doing something with that scrap of ground by the roses for years, Michael.'

'You might have. I haven't.'

'No, we discussed it before Christmas. You said, "Next year maybe." Like the year before, and the year before. Besides, you said yourself how nice Brian's rockery looks.'

‘When?’

‘Last autumn. And Alice said, “A rockery would look enchanting in your back garden,” and you agreed.’

‘Your mother,’ Dad said to Julia, ‘is a human Dictaphone.’

Julia refused to be enlisted.

Dad took a gulp of water. ‘Whatever I said to Alice, I didn’t mean it. I was being polite.’

‘Pity you can’t extend the same courtesy to your wife.’

Julia and me looked at each other.

‘What sort of scale,’ Dad piled peas on his fork, wearily, ‘do we have in mind? A life-sized model of the Lake District?’

Mum reached for a magazine on the dresser. ‘Something like this...’

‘Oh, I get it. Harper’s Bazaar do a special on rockeries so of course we have to have one too.’

‘Kate’s got a nice rockery,’ Julia said, neutrally. ‘With heathers.’

‘Lucky old Kate.’ Dad put his glasses on to study the magazine. ‘Very nice, Helena, but they’ve used real Italian marble here.’

Mum’s ‘That’s right’ meant And I’m having marble too.

‘Do you have any inkling of how much marble costs?’

‘More than an inkling. I called a landscape gardener in Kidderminster.’

‘Why should I shell out money,’ Dad tossed the magazine on the floor, ‘for a pile of rocks?’

Mum normally backs down at this point, but not today. ‘So it’s all right for you to spend six hundred pounds on a golf-club membership you hardly ever use, but it isn’t all right for me to improve our property?’

‘The golf course,’ Dad tried not to shout, ‘as I’ve tried to tell you, over and over and over and over, is where deals get cut. Including key promotions. I may not like it, you may not like it, but there it is. And Craig Salt does not play his golf on public links.’

‘Don’t wave your fork at me, Michael.’

Dad didn’t put his fork down. ‘I am the breadwinner in this family, and I don’t think it’s unreasonable for me to spend at least a portion of my salary however the hell I see fit.’

My mashed potatoes’d gone cold.

‘So in effect,’ Mum folded her napkin, ‘you’re telling me to stick to jam-making and leave the grown-up decisions to the one in the trousers?’

Dad rolled his eyes. (I’d get killed for doing that.) ‘Save the female libber stuff for your Women’s Institute friends, Helena. I’m asking you nicely. I’ve had a very long day.’

‘Patronize your underlings in your supermarkets as much as you want, Michael.’ Mum noisily stacked the plates and took them to the kitchen hatch. ‘But don’t try it at home. I’m asking you nicely. I’ve had a very long day.’ She went into the kitchen.

Dad stared at her empty chair. ‘So, Jason, how was school?’

My stomach granny-knotted up. Hangman blocked ‘Not so bad’.

‘Jason?’ Dad’s voice went hot and red. ‘I asked you how school was.’

‘Fine, thanks.’ (Today’d been crap. Mr Kempsey bollocked me for cake crumbs in my music book and Mr Carver’d told me I was as ‘useful as a spastic’ at hockey.)

We heard Mum scrape plates into the kitchen bin.

Knife on china, a whooshly thud.

‘Excellent,’ said Dad. ‘How about you, Julia?’

Before my sister could say a word a plate smashed on the kitchen floor.
Dad jumped out of his seat. ‘Helena?’ His breeziness’d gone.

Mum’s answer was to slam the back door.

Dad jumped up and went after her.

Rooks cawked round St Gabriel’s steeple.

Julia blew out her cheeks. ‘Three stars?’

Miserably, I held up four fingers.

‘Just a rocky patch, Jace.’ Julia’s got this brave smile. ‘That’s all. Most marriages have them. Really. Don’t worry.’

GOTCHA

Mrs Thatcher frazzled this twerp in a bow tie on BBC1 this evening. He was saying sinking the General Belgrano outside the Total Exclusion Zone was morally and legally wrong. (Actually we sank the Belgrano some days ago but the papers've just got hold of the pictures and since the Sheffield we've got zero sympathy for the Argie bastards.) Mrs Thatcher fixed her stained-glass blue eyes on that pillock and pointed out that the enemy cruiser'd been zigzagging in and out of the zone all day. She said something like, 'The fathers and mothers of our country did not elect me the Prime Minister of this country to gamble with the lives of their sons over questions of legal niceties. Must I remind you that we are a country at war?' The whole studio cheered and the whole country cheered too, I reckon, 'cept for Michael Foot and Red Ken Livingstone and Anthony Wedgwood Benn and all those Loony Lefties. Mrs Thatcher's bloody ace. She's so strong, so calm, so sure. Loads more use than the Queen, who hasn't said a dickie-bird since the war began. Some countries like Spain are saying we shouldn't've fired on the Belgrano, but the only reason so many Argies drowned was that the other ships in its convoy scarpered off instead of saving their own men. Our Royal Navy'd never ever leave Britons to drown like that. And anyway, when you join the army or navy in any country, you're paid to risk your life. Like Tom Yew. Now Galtieri is trying to get us back to the negotiating table, but Maggie's told him the only thing she'll discuss is the United Nations' Resolution 502. Argentina's unconditional withdrawal from British soil. Some Argie diplomat in New York, still harping on about the Belgrano being outside the zone, said Britain no longer rules the waves, it just waives the rules. The Daily Mail says it's typical of a tinpot Latin paper-pusher to make stupid quips about life and death. The Daily Mail says the Argies should've thought about the consequences before they stuck their poxy blue-and-white flag on our sovereign colony. The Daily Mail's dead right. The Daily Mail says that Leopoldo Galtieri only invaded the Falklands to distract attention from all his own people he's tortured, murdered and pushed out of helicopters over the sea. The Daily Mail's dead right again. The Daily Mail says Galtieri's brand of patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel. The Daily Mail's as right as Margaret Thatcher. All England's turned into a dynamo. People are queuing up outside hospitals to donate blood. Mr Whitlock spent most of our biology lesson saying how certain patriotic young men cycled to

Worcester hospital to give blood. (Everyone knows he was talking about Gilbert Swinyard and Pete Redmarley.) They were told by a nurse that they're too young. So Mr Whitlock's writing to Michael Spicer, our Member of Parliament, to complain that the children of England are being denied the right to contribute to the war effort. His letter's already in the Malvern Gazetteer.

Nick Yew is a school hero 'cause of Tom. Nick said the Sheffield was just an unlucky fluke. Our anti-missile systems'll be modified to knock out the Exocets from now on. So we should be getting our islands back pretty soon. The Sun's paying £100 for the best anti-Argie joke. I can't do jokes, but I'm keeping a scrapbook about the war. I'm cutting out stuff from the newspapers and magazines. Neal Brose is keeping one too. He reckons it'll be worth a fortune twenty or thirty years from now when the Falklands War has turned into history. But all this excitement'll never turn dusty and brown in archives and libraries. No way. People'll remember everything about the Falklands till the end of the world.

Mum was at the dining-room table surrounded by bank papers when I got back from school. Dad's fireproof document box was out and open. Through the kitchen hatch I asked if she'd had a good day.

'Not a "good day" exactly,' Mum didn't take her eyes off her calculator, 'but it's certainly been a real revelation.'

'That's good,' I said, doubting it. I got a couple of Digestives and a glass of Ribena. Julia'd snaffled all the Jaffa Cakes 'cause she's at home all day revising for her A-levels. Greedy moo. 'What're you doing?'

'Skateboarding.'

I should've just gone upstairs. 'What's for dinner?'

'Toad.'

One unsarky answer to one simple question, that's all I wanted. 'Doesn't Dad usually do all the bank statements and stuff?'

'Yes.' Mum finally looked at me. 'Isn't your lucky old father in for a pleasant surprise when he comes home?' Something vicious'd got into her voice. It pulled the knot in my guts so tight I still can't loosen it.

Wish it had been toad for dinner, not tinned carrots, baked beans and Heinz meatballs in gravy. A plate of browny orange. Mum can cook real food, when relatives visit, say. She's on a work-to-rule till she gets her rockery, I reckon. Dad said it was 'utterly delicious'. His sarcasm didn't bother with camoflauge. Neither did Mum's. 'I am glad you think so.' (What Mum and Dad say to each other's half a world away from what they mean, these days. Ordinary polite words shouldn't be so toxic but they can be.) That was all they said, just about, for the entire meal. Pudding was apple sponge. The syrup trail from my spoon was the path of our marines. To forget the atmosphere, I bravely led our lads yomping over custard snow to ultimate victory in Port Stanley.

It was Julia's turn to do the dishes but we've become sort of allies in the last couple of weeks so I dried for her. My sister's not totally revolting all the time. She even spoke a bit about her boyfriend Ewan while we did the dishes. His mum's in the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. She's the percussionist and gets to crash the cymbals and play the thundery kettle drums, which sounds an ace laugh. But Hangman's been giving me a hard time since Mum and Dad's last barney when Mum smashed the plate. So I let Julia do most of the talking. The war's become the first thing I think about in the morning and the last thing at night, so it's nice to hear about something else. Evening sunshine flooded the valley floor between our garden and the Malverns.

The tulips are black plum, emulsion white and yolky gold.

Mum and Dad must've called a weird peacefire while we'd been in the kitchen 'cause after the washing-up they sat at the table and seemed to be talking normally about the day and stuff. Julia'd asked if they'd like a cup of coffee and Dad'd said, 'That'd be lovely, darling' and Mum said, 'Thank you, sweetheart.' I told myself I'd misread the signs completely when I got back from school, and my gut-knot unworried itself a bit looser. Dad was telling Mum a funny story about how his boss Craig Salt'd let Dad's trainee Danny Lawlor drive Craig Salt's DeLorean sports car round a go-karting track on a team-building weekend. So instead of sloping off upstairs I went into the living room to watch Tomorrow's World on TV.

That's how I heard Mum launch her ambush. 'By the way, Michael. Why did you take out a second mortgage with NatWest for five thousand pounds in January?'

Five thousand pounds! Our house only cost twenty-two!

In the future, according to Tomorrow's World, cars will drive themselves along strips implanted in roads. We'll just punch in our destination. There'll never be another traffic accident again.

'Been sifting through my accounts, have we?'

'If I hadn't looked at the finances, I'd still be in a state of pristine ignorance, wouldn't I?'

'So. You just went into my office and helped yourself.'

Dad, I thought, Dad! Don't say that to her.

'Are you honestly,' Mum's voice turned quivery, 'telling me – me, Michael, me – that I'm not allowed into your office? That your filing cabinets are out of bounds for me as well as the children? Are you?'

Dad said nothing.

‘Call me old fashioned, but I think a wife who discovers her husband is in hock to the tune of five thousand pounds is entitled to some pretty bloody straight answers.’

I felt sick, cold and old.

‘And where,’ Dad finally said, ‘did this sudden interest in accountancy spring from?’

‘Why have you remortgaged our house?’

The Tomorrow’s World presenter was gluing himself to the ceiling of the studio. ‘British brains dream up a chemical bond stronger than gravity!’ The presenter grinned. ‘You can bet your life on it!’

‘Right. Then I’ll tell you why, shall I?’

‘I do wish you would.’

‘Rescheduling.’

‘Are you trying,’ Mum did a half-laugh, ‘to dazzle me with jargon?’

‘It’s not jargon. It’s rescheduling. Please don’t go all hysterical on me because—’

‘How am I supposed to respond, Michael? Using our house as security! Then the money gets paid out in tidy parcels to God knows where. Or is it to God knows who?’

‘What,’ Dad went quiet as death, ‘do you mean by that?’

‘I politely ask you what is going on,’ Mum’d backed off from some sort of brink, ‘and all I get is evasion. Can you tell me what I’m supposed to think? Please? Because I don’t understand what’s—’

‘Exactly, Helena! Thank you! You just put your finger on it! You don’t understand! I took out the loan because there was a shortfall! I know money is for the little people to sort out, but as you may have noticed while you did

your Sherlock Holmes act this afternoon, we've got thumping great ruddy mortgage payments to keep up on the first mortgage! Insurance premiums on all this junk you insist on buying! Utility bills! Your blessed kitchen and your new Royal ruddy Doulton dinner service – that we'll use to impress your sister and Brian twice a year at most – to pay for! Your car to be replaced whenever its ashtray's gone out of fashion! And now, now, you've decided life isn't worth living without...new adventures in landscape gardening!'

'Voice, Michael. The kids'll hear.'

'That never seems to worry you.'

'Now you're getting hysterical.'

'Right. "Hysterical". Fine. You asked for a suggestion, Helena, so here we go. I suggest that you spend your waking life in meetings, more bloody meetings, get blamed for staff shortages, for stock leakages, for disappointing balance sheets. I suggest you bugger up your back clocking up twenty, twenty-five, thirty thousand road miles per year! Then, then, you are welcome to call me hysterical. Until then, I'd be grateful if you didn't give me the third bloody degree on how I choose to juggle your bills. That's my suggestion.'

Dad stomped upstairs.

He's slamming his filing-cabinet drawers.

Mum hasn't left the dining room. I hope to God she isn't crying.

Wish Tomorrow's World would open up and swallow me.



War's an auction where whoever can pay most in damage and still be standing wins. The news is bad. Brian Hanrahan said the landing at San Carlos Bay was the bloodiest day for the Royal Navy since the Second World War. The hills blocked our radar so we didn't see the warplanes coming till they were right on top of us. The clear morning was a gift to the Argentinians. They attacked the main ships, not the troop transporters, 'cause once the task force is sunk, our land forces'll be easy to pick off. HMS Ardent was sunk. HMS Brilliant is crippled. HMS Antrim and HMS Argonaut are out of the war for good. TV's been showing the same pictures, all day. An enemy Mirage III-E sharks through a skyful of Sea Cats and Sea

Wolfs and Sea Slugs. Water spouts kerboom in the bay. Black smoke pours from the hull of the Ardent. For the first time we saw the Falkland Islands themselves. Treeless, houseless, hedgeless, no colours bar greys and greens. Julia said it's like the Hebrides and she's right. (We went to Mull three years ago for the雨iest holiday in Taylor history, but the best one. Me and Dad played Subbuteo the entire week. I was Liverpool, he was Nottingham Forest.) Brian Hanrahan reported that only our Sea Harriers' counter-attack prevented an outright catastrophe. He described an enemy plane downed by a Harrier, cartwheeling right over his head till it crashed into the sea.

HMS Coventry wasn't in the report.

God knows who's winning and who's losing now. There's a rumour the Soviet Union's feeding the Argentinians satellite pictures of our fleet, which is why they always know where to find us. (Brezhnev's dying or dead so nobody knows what's going on in the Kremlin.) Neal Brose said if that's true then Ronald Reagan'll have to get involved 'cause of the NATO alliance. Then World War Three might start.

The Daily Mail listed all the lies the junta are telling their people. It made me livid. John Nott, our Minister of Defence, would never lie to us. Julia asked how I knew we weren't being lied to? 'We're British,' I told her. 'Why would the government lie?' Julia replied that it was to assure us that our wonderful war is going swimmingly when in fact it's going down the toilet. 'But,' went my answer, 'we're not being lied to.' Julia said that's exactly what Argentinian people'll be saying right now.

Right now. That's what freaks me. I dip my fountain pen into a pot of ink, and a Wessex helicopter crashes into a glacier on South Georgia. I line up my protractor on an angle in my maths book and a Sidewinder missile locks on to a Mirage III. I draw a circle with my compass and a Welsh Guard stands up in a patch of burning gorse and gets a bullet through his eye.

How can the world just go on, as if none of this is happening?

I was changing out of my school uniform when this dream of a silver MG cruised down Kingfisher Meadows. Into our driveway it swung, and parked under my bedroom window. Rain'd been spitting all afternoon so the hood was up. My first view of my sister's boyfriend, then, was via aerial surveillance. I'd expected Ewan to look sort of Prince Edwardish, but he's got exploding red hair, sooty freckles and a bouncy walk. He wore a peach shirt under a baggy indigo jumper, black drainpipes, one of those studded belts that sags loose off your hips, and winkle-pickers with white tube socks, which everyone's wearing recently. I yelled up to Julia's attic that Ewan was here. Thumps thumped, a bottle was knocked over and Julia muttered, 'Bugger.' (What is it that girls do before they go out? Julia takes aeons to get ready. Dean Moran says his're just the same.) Then she yelled, 'MUM! Will you get it?' Mum was already hurrying down the hall. I took up my sniper's-nest position on the landing.

'Ewan, I presume!' Mum used the voice she uses to put nervous people at ease. 'A pleasure to meet you, at long last.'

Ewan didn't look at all nervous. 'Real pleasure to meet you too, Mrs Taylor.' His voice was poshish but not as posh as Mum's put-on posh.

'Julia's told us oodles about you.'

'Oh dear.' Ewan has a froggy smile. 'That's torn it.'

'Oh, no no no,' Mum laughed like confetti, 'it's all good.'

'She's told me "oodles" about you, too.'

'Good, good. Well. Jolly good. Won't you step inside while milady's finishing her...well, while she's finishing.'

'Thanks.'

'So,' Mum closed the door, 'Julia tells us you're at the Cathedral School? Upper sixth?'

‘That’s right. Same as Julia. A-levels just around the corner.’

‘Yes, yes. And do you, er, enjoy it?’

‘The Cathedral School? Or the A-levels?’

‘Er...’ Mum did a smiley shrug. ‘The school.’

‘It’s a bit set in its ways. But I wouldn’t knock it. Too much.’

‘A lot to be said for tradition. Far too easy to throw the bath water out with the baby.’

‘I’d agree with you wholeheartedly, Mrs Taylor.’

‘Right. Well.’ Mum glanced at the ceiling. ‘Julia’s just getting her things together. Perhaps I could offer you a tea or coffee?’

‘That’s very kind, Mrs Taylor,’ Ewan’s excuse was seamless, ‘but my mother’s birthday dinners run to military precision. If she suspects me of dawdling, it’ll be the execution squad at dawn.’

‘Oh, I can sympathize with her! Julia’s brother won’t grace the dinner table until everything’s stone cold. Drives me to distraction. But I do hope you’ll eat with us one of these evenings. Julia’s father’s dying to meet you.’
(News to me.)

‘I’m afraid I’d make a dreadful nuisance of myself.’

‘Not at all!’

‘I might – I’m a vegetarian, you see.’

‘That’s a jolly good excuse to get out the cookery books and try something adventurous. You’ll promise to share a meal with us soon?’

(Dad calls vegetarians ‘The Nut Cutlet Brigade’.)

Ewan did a polite smile that wasn’t exactly a Yes.

‘Well. Jolly good. I’ll just...pop up and check that Julia knows you’re here. Will you be okay waiting here, just for a minute or two?’

Ewan inspected the family photos above the telephone. (The Baby Jason one makes me cringe but my parents won't take it down.) I inspected Ewan, the mysterious being who actually chooses to spend free time with Julia. He even spends money on necklaces and LPs and stuff like that for her. Why?

Ewan didn't look surprised as I came downstairs. 'Jason, right?'

'No. I'm The Thing.'

'She only calls you that when she's really angry with you.'

'Yeah, like every minute of every hour of every day.'

'Not true. Promise you. And God, you should've heard what she called me when she spent the whole morning in the hairdresser's,' Ewan pulled this funny guilty face, 'and I didn't even notice.'

'What?'

'If I repeated it verbatim,' Ewan lowered his voice, 'chunks of plaster would come crashing down from the ceiling, in shock. The wallpaper would unpeel itself. A pretty grim first impression that would make on your parents, don't you think? Very sorry, but some things must remain veiled in secrecy.'

Must be ace being Ewan. Being able to talk like that. I could think of much worse kids to have as a brother-in-law. 'Can I sit in your MG?'

Ewan glanced at his chunky Sekonda (with metal strap). 'Why not?'

‘So, do you like it?’

Suede steering wheel. Ox-blood leather, walnut and chrome finishings. Gear-stick knob snug in my palm. Sleek lowness, the tilt and hug of the squelky seats. Ghostly glow on the dashboard when Ewan put the key in the ignition. Needles afloat in gauges. Tarry-smelling hood muffling out the wind. An incredible song filled the car from four hidden speakers. (““Heaven”,’ Ewan told me, breezy but proud. ‘Talking Heads. David Byrne’s a genius.’ I just nodded, still taking it all in.) Bitter orange scent from a crystally air-freshener. CND sticker next to the tax disc. God, if I had a car like Ewan’s MG, I’d get out of Black Swan Green faster than a Super Étandard. Far away from Mum and Dad and their three-, four- and five-star arguments. Far from school and Ross Wilcox and Gary Drake and Neal Brose and Mr Carver. Dawn Madden could come with me, but nobody else. I’d do an Evel Knievel off the White Cliffs of Dover, over the English Channel, over the spotless stainless sunrise. We’d land on the Normandy beaches, drive south, lie about our ages and work in vineyards or ski chalets. My poems’d get published by Faber Faber with a sketch of me on the cover. Every fashion photographer in Europe’d want to shoot Dawn. My school’d boast about us in their prospectus but I’d never, ever, ever come back to muddy Worcestershire.

‘Do you a swap,’ I told Ewan. ‘My Big Trak for your MG. You can program in up to twenty commands.’

Ewan pretended to agonize over this tempting offer. ‘Not sure if I could navigate the Worcester one-way system, even on a Big Trak.’ His breath smelt of spearmint Tic-Tacs and I caught a whiff of Old Spice. ‘Sorry.’

Julia tapped on my window with an amused Oy! in her eyes. I realized my annoying sister’s a woman. Dark lipstick, Julia had on, and a necklace of bluish pearls that’d belonged to our grandma. I wound down the window. Julia peered in at Ewan, then me, then Ewan. ‘You’re late.’

Ewan turned Talking Heads down. ‘I’m late?’

That smile's nothing to do with me.

Were Mum and Dad like this, once upon a time?



Our dining room sort of juddered like a silent bomb'd gone off. Me, Mum and Julia froze as Radio 4 told us which ship'd been sunk. HMS Coventry'd been anchored at her usual station north of Pebble Island with the frigate HMS Broadsword. At approximately 1400 hours a pair of enemy Skyhawks came flying in at deck level out of nowhere. The Coventry launched her Sea Darts, but missed, allowing the Skyhawks to drop four of their 1,000-pound

bombs at point-blank range. One fell astern, but the other three tore into the ship's port side. All three detonated deep within the ship, knocking out the power systems. The fire control crews were soon overwhelmed, and in a matter of minutes the Coventry was listing badly to port. Sea Kings and Wessex helicopters flew over from San Carlos to get the men out of the freezing water. Unhurt men were transferred to the field tents. More serious cases were flown to the hospital ships.

I don't remember what the news moved on to after.

'Nineteen out of how many?' Mum spoke through her fingers.

I knew the answer 'cause of my scrapbook. 'About three hundred.'

Julia calculated, 'Better than ninety per cent chance that Tom's okay, then.'

Mum'd gone pale. 'His poor mother! She must be having kittens.'

I thought aloud, 'Poor Debby Crombie, too.'

Mum didn't know. 'What's Debby Crombie got to do with anything?'

Julia told her, 'Debby's Tom's girlfriend.'

'Oh,' said Mum. 'Oh.'

War may be an auction for countries. For soldiers it's a lottery.

The school bus still hadn't come at a quarter past eight. Birdsong strafed and morsed from the oak on the village green. Upstairs curtains at the Black Swan twitched open and I think I glimpsed Isaac Pye in a kite of sunshine, giving us all the evil eye. There was no sign of Nick Yew yet, but he's always one of the last to arrive 'cause he walks all the way from Hake's Lane.

'My old bid tried to call Mrs Yew,' John Tookey said, 'but her phone was busy. Non-stop.'

'Half the village was trying to get through,' Dawn Madden told him. 'That'd be why nobody could.'

'Yeah,' I agreed. 'The lines'd've got jammed.'

But Dawn Madden didn't even acknowledge I'd spoken.

'Boomy boom-boom,' chanted Squelch, 'boomer-ker-boomer BOOM!'

'Shut yer neck, Squelch,' Ross Wilcox snapped, 'or I'll shut it for yer.'

'Don't pick on Squelch,' Dawn Madden told Ross Wilcox. 'Ain't his fault he's soft in the head.'

'Shut yer neck, Squelch,' Squelch twitched, 'or I'll shut it for yer.'

'Tom'll be okay,' Grant Burch said. 'We'd've heard if he weren't.'

'Yeah,' said Philip Phelps. 'We'd've heard if he weren't.'

'Is there an echo round here?' grunted Ross Wilcox. 'How would you two know, anyway?'

'How I'd know is that the instant the Yews know,' Grant Burch flobbed, 'through Navy channels, they'd phone my old man 'cause Tom's old man and my old man grew up together. That's how I know.'

‘Sure, Burch,’ Wilcox mocked.

‘Yeah.’ Grant Burch’s wrist was still in plaster so he couldn’t do much about Wilcox’s sarcasm. But Grant Burch remembers stuff. ‘I am sure.’

‘Hey!’ Gavin Coley pointed. ‘Look!'

Gilbert Swinyard and Pete Redmarley appeared in the far distance, way over the crossroads.

‘Must’ve gone down Hake’s Lane,’ guessed Keith Broadwas, ‘dead early. To the Yews’ place. To make sure Tom’s okay.’

We saw that Gilbert Swinyard and Pete Redmarley were almost running.

I tested Why isn’t Nick with them? but Hangman blocked ‘Nick’.

‘How come,’ Darren Croome said, ‘Nick ain’t with them?’

Birds detonated out of the oak without warning and we jumped but didn’t laugh about it. Incredible to see, it was. Countless hundreds of birds, orbiting the village green once, elastically longer, twice, winging shorter, three times, then, as if obeying an order, vanishing inside the tree again.

‘Maybe,’ Dawn Madden guessed, ‘Nixon’s given Nick permission not to come to school today. Considering, like.’

It was a reasonable guess, but now we could see the looks on Swinyard’s and Redmarley’s faces.

‘Oh...’ Grant Burch muttered. ‘Fuck, no.’

'By now,' Mr Nixon coughed to clear his throat, 'you are all doubtless aware that Thomas Yew, an old boy of our school, has, in the last twenty-four hours, been killed in the conflict over the Falkland Islands.' (Our headmaster was right, we all knew. Norman Bates the school bus driver had Radio Wyvern on and Tom Yew's name was on that.) 'Thomas was not the most studious boy ever to grace the classrooms of our school, nor the most obedient. Indeed, my register of crimes and punishments informs me I was obliged to administer the slipper on no less than four occasions. But neither Thomas nor myself are' (bleak silence) 'were' (another one) 'the type of man to bear a grudge. When the Royal Navy's recruitment officer approached me for a character reference regarding Thomas, I felt able to recommend this spirited young man, unreservedly and unconditionally. Thomas returned the courtesy some months later, by inviting my wife and myself to his passing-out ceremony in Portsmouth. Rarely have' (a flutter of amazement that anyone'd ever married Mr Nixon swept round the hall. One glare from Mr Nixon and the flutter dropped dead.) 'rarely have I accepted an invitation to an official function with such pleasure, and such personal pride. Thomas had clearly flourished under military discipline. He had matured into a worthy ambassador for our school and a credit to Her Majesty's forces. This is why the grief I feel this morning, upon learning of his death' (surely that wasn't a crack in Nixon's voice?) 'aboard HMS Coventry is as bitter as it is heartfelt. The mood of depression both in the staffroom and in this hall tells me that this grief is shared by all of us.' (Mr Nixon took off his glasses and for a moment he looked not like an SS commandant but just somebody's tired dad.) 'I will be sending a telegram of condolence to Thomas's family after assembly, on behalf of the school. I hope that those of you who are close to the Yews will lend them your support. Life can inflict few cruelties – perhaps no cruelty – more acute than the death of a son – or brother. However, I also hope that you will give Thomas's family sufficient space in which to grieve.' (A few of the third-year girls were weeping now. Mr Nixon looked in their direction, but he'd turned his death ray off. He said nothing for five, ten, fifteen seconds. A bit of shuffling started. Twenty, twenty-five, thirty seconds. I intercepted a look from Miss Ronkswood to Miss Wyche that said, Is he okay? Miss Wyche shrugged, very slightly.) 'I hope,' Mr Nixon finally went on, 'that, as you consider Thomas's sacrifice, you will think about the consequences of

violence, be it military or emotional. I hope you will note who initiates violence, who conducts the violence, and who must pay the price of violence. Wars do not simply appear from nowhere. Wars come, over a long period of time, and believe me, there is always plenty of blame to be shared out between all those who failed to prevent its bloody arrival. I also hope you will consider what is truly precious in your own lives, and what is merely...flim-flam...grandstanding...froth...posturing...egotism.' Our headmaster looked spent. 'That is all.' Mr Nixon nodded at Mr Kempsey at the piano. Mr Kempsey told us to turn to the hymn that goes, Oh hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril on the sea. We all stood up and sang it for Tom Yew.

Normal assemblies have mile-high messages carved into them like Helping People Is Good, or Even Dimmest Dimmers Can Succeed If They Never Give Up. But I'm not sure if even the teachers were sure what Mr Nixon meant this morning.



Tom Yew's death killed the thrill of the war. There was no way to get his body back to Worcestershire so he's been buried out there, on those rocky islands still being fought over. Nothing's got back to normal yet. Make-believe grief is fun. But when someone really dies, there's just this horrible draggingness. Wars go on for months, or years. Vietnam did. Who says this won't be one of them? The Argentinians've got 30,000 men on the Falklands, all in dug-in positions. We've got just 6,000 trying to scramble out of our bridgehead. Two of our only three Chinook helicopters were lost when the Atlantic Conveyor was sunk, so our soldiers're having to advance towards Port Stanley on foot. Surely even Luxembourg's got more than

three decent helicopters? There's rumours of the Argentinian navy breaking out of its ports and cutting off our sea-lines to Ascension Island. We're running out of petrol, too. (Like the armed forces of Great Britain just add up to this crap family saloon car.) Mount Kent, Two Sisters, Tumbledown Mountain. The names're friendly but the terrain isn't. Brian Hanrahan says the only cover for the marines are giant boulders. Our helicopters can't give air cover 'cause of the mist, snow, hail, gales. Like Dartmoor, he said, in midwinter. Our paras can't dig foxholes 'cause the ground's too hard and some've even been crippled with trench-foot. (My granddad once said how his dad'd got trench-foot in Passchendaele in 1916.) East Falkland's one massive minefield. The beaches, the bridges, the gulleys, everywhere. At night, enemy snipers call for starshell so the landscape's lit dazzling like fridge-light. Bullets rain down. The Argentinians are using ammunition, one expert says, like they've got an unlimited supply. Plus, our men can't just bomb the buildings or we'd end up killing the same civilians we're s'posed to be saving. And there's not that many of them. General Galtieri knows the winter's on his side. From the balcony of his palace, he said Argentina will fight until the very last man, dead or alive.

Nick Yew hasn't come back to school. Dean Moran saw him in Mr Rhydd's shop buying a box of eggs and Fairy Liquid, but Moran didn't know what to say. Moran said Nick's face was dead.

Last week the Malvern Gazetteer had Tom Yew on its front page. He was smiling and saluting at the camera in his ensign's uniform. I pasted it in my scrapbook. I'm running out of pages.

When I got home on Monday there were about ten lumps of granite blocking the driveway, plus five sacks labelled CRUSHED SHELL FILLER. Plus a giant turtle shell that turned out to be a pre-cast fibreglass pond lining. Mr Castle was on a pair of stepladders clipping his hedge, which divides his front garden from ours. ‘Dad’s recreating the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, is he?’

‘Something like that.’

‘I hope he’s got a JCB stashed away in his garage.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Over a ton of rock you’ve got there. Nobody’s going to be shifting that little lot on a wheelbarrow. Cracked the tarmac something chronic, too, they have.’ Mr Castle smiled and winced at the same time. ‘I was here, watching the men dump it.’

Mum got home twenty minutes later, absolutely apeshit. I was watching the war on TV, so across the hallway I heard her phone up the landscapers. ‘You were supposed to bring the rocks tomorrow! You were supposed to lay them in the garden! Not just dump the things in the middle of our drive! A “mix-up”? A “mix-up”? No. I’m calling it criminal stupidity! Where are we supposed to park?’ The call ended with Mum shrieking the words ‘instructing my solicitors!’ and hanging up.

When Dad came home at gone seven o'clock he didn't mention the rocks on the driveway. Not a word. But the way he said nothing was masterly. Mum didn't mention the rocks either, so we had a stand-off. You could hear the strain in the room, like the squeak of cables. Mum boasts to visitors and relatives how, no matter what, we sit round as a family to share an evening meal. She'd've done us all a favour if she'd given this tradition a night off. Julia did her best to spin out a story about today's World Affairs A-level paper (she'd got all the questions she'd revised for) and Mum and Dad paid polite attention, but I sort of felt the rocks outside, waiting to be referred to.

Mum served up the treacle tart and vanilla ice cream.

'I don't want to be accused of nagging, Helena,' Dad began, 'but I was wondering when I might be able to park my car in my garage?'

'The workmen will be putting the rockery in place tomorrow. There was a misunderstanding about delivery times. They'll be finished by tomorrow evening.'

'Ah, good. It's just our insurance policy clearly states we're covered for off-road parking only, so if—'

'Tomorrow, Michael.'

'That's fantastic. This is a lovely treacle tart, by the way. Is it from Greenland?'

'Sainsbury's.'

Our spoons scraped on our dishes.

'I don't want to be accused of interfering, Helena—'

(Mum's nostrils actually went stiff, like a cartoon bull.)

'—but I hope you haven't actually paid these people, yet?'

‘No. I’ve paid a deposit.’

‘A deposit. I see. I only ask because you do hear horror stories about people handing over quite large sums of money to cowboys in these fly-by-night businesses. Then before you can even phone a lawyer, the director’s done a Ronnie Biggs off to Costa del Chips or wherever. And the poor old customer never gets to see a single penny of his hard-earned money again. Distressing, how these con-men can swindle the gullible.’

‘You said you’d “washed your hands of the whole affair”, Michael.’

‘I did, yes,’ Dad can’t hide satisfaction to save his life, ‘but I didn’t count on not being able to park my own car on my own drive. That’s all I wanted to say.’

Something silent smashed without being dropped.

Mum left the table. Not angry, and not tearful, but worse. Like none of us were there.

Dad just stared at where she’d been sitting.

‘In my exam today,’ Julia twisted a strand of her hair, ‘this term I’m not totally sure about, “pyrrhic victory”, came up. Do you know what a “pyrrhic victory” is, Dad?’

Dad gave Julia a very complicated stare.

Julia didn’t flinch.

Dad got up and went to the garage, for a smoke, most like.

The wreckage of dessert lay between me and Julia.

We watched it for a bit. ‘A what victory?’

“Pyrrhic”. Ancient Greece. A pyrrhic victory is one where you win, but the cost of winning is so high that it would’ve been better if you’d never

bothered with the war in the first place. Useful word, isn't it? So, Jace. Looks like we're doing the dishes again. Wash or dry?"



Ceasefire agreed in the Falklands

The first 100 hours after
the start of hostilities

The whole of Great Britain's like it's Bonfire Night and Christmas Day and St George's Day and the Queen's Silver Jubilee all rolled into one. Mrs Thatcher appeared outside 10 Downing Street, saying, 'Rejoice! Just rejoice!' The photographers' flashbulbs and the crowds went crazy; she wasn't a politician at all, but all four members of Bucks Fizz at the Eurovision Song Contest. Everyone sang 'Rule Britannia, Britannia rules the waves, Britons never never never shall be slaves', over and over. (Has that song got any verses or is it just one never-ending chorus?) This summer isn't green, this summer is the red, white and blue of the Union Jack. Bells've been rung, beacons lit, street parties've broken out up and down the country. Isaac Pye had an all-night happy hour at the Black Swan last night. In Argentina riots're being reported in the major cities with lootings and shootings and some people're saying it's just a matter of time before the junta's toppled. The Daily Mail's full of how Great British guts and Great British leadership won the war. No prime minister's ever been more popular than Premier Margaret Thatcher in the entire history of opinion polls.

I should be really happy.

Julia reads the Guardian, which has got all sorts of stuff not in the Daily Mail. Most of the 30,000 enemy soldiers, she says, were just conscripts and Indians. Their elite troops all raced back to Port Stanley as the British paratroopers advanced. Some of the ones they left behind got killed by bayonets. Having your intestines pulled out through a slit in the belly! What a 1914 way to die in 1982. Brian Hanrahan said he saw one prisoner being interviewed who said they didn't even know what the Malvinas were or why they'd been brought there. Julia says the main reasons we won were (a) the Argentinians couldn't buy any more Exocets, (b) their navy stayed holed up in mainland bases, (c) their air force ran out of trained pilots. Julia says it would've been cheaper to set every Falkland Islander up with their own farm in the Cotswolds than to've gone to war. She reckons nobody'll pay to clean up the mess, so that much of the farmland on the islands'll be off limits until the mines've rusted.

A hundred years, that might take.

Today's big story in the Daily Mail's about whether Cliff Richard the singer's having sex with Sue Barker the tennis player, or whether they're just good friends.

Tom Yew wrote a letter to his family the day before the Coventry was sunk. The letter made it back to Black Swan Green, just a few days ago. Dean Moran's mum read it, 'cause she was Tom Yew's godmother, and Kelly Moran got the details out of her. Our navy men thought the Falkland Islanders were a bunch of inbred bumbler ('Honest,' Tom wrote, 'some of these guys are their own fathers'), like Benny the dimwit handyman from Crossroads on TV. They even started calling the islanders 'Bennies'. ('I'm not making this up – I met a Benny this morning who thought a silicon chip was a Sicilian crisp.') Soon everyone in the lower ranks was saying 'Benny' this and 'Benny' that. When the officers found out, an order was issued to get the men to stop using this name. The men stopped. But a day or two later, Tom was hauled over by his lieutenant, who demanded to know why the crew were referring to the locals not as 'Bennies' but as 'Stills'. 'So I told the lieutenant "Because they're still Bennies, Sir."'

Dad was half wrong, half right about the landscape gardener doing a runner. When the company stopped answering their phone, Mum drove to Kidderminster but there was only a broken chair in an empty office. Wires stuck out of the walls. Two men loading a photocopier on to the truck told her the firm'd gone bankrupt. So the rockery rocks stayed on our driveway for two more weeks, until Mr Broadwas got back from his holiday in Ilfracombe. Mr Broadwas does some gardening work for my parents. Dad sort of elbowed Mum out of the rescue operation. At eight o'clock this morning (today's Saturday) a lorry with a fork-lift truck pulled up outside our house. Out of the cab got Mr Broadwas, and his sons Gordon and Keith. Mr Broadwas's son-in-law Doug drove the fork-lift truck. First, Dad and Doug took down the side gate so the machine could lug the granite to the back. Next, we all got stuck in digging the hole for the pond. Hot and sweaty work, it was. Mum sort of hovered in the shade, but men with spades put up an invisible wall. She brought a tray of coffee and Dutch butter biscuits. Everyone thanked Mum politely and Mum said 'You're welcome' politely too. Dad sent me to Mr Rhydd's on my bike to get 7-Up and Mars Bars. (Mr Rhydd told me it was the hottest day of 1982 so far.) When I got back me and Gordon carted the buckets of topsoil to the end of the garden. I didn't know what to say to Gordon Broadwas. Gordon's in my year at school (in a dimmer's class) and here was my dad paying his dad. How embarrassing's that? Gordon didn't speak much either, so maybe he felt embarrassed too. Mum was looking stonier and stonier as the rockery in the garden and the rockery in her blueprint got more and more different. After the pond's shell was lowered and we stopped for toasted sandwiches, Mum announced she was going into Tewkesbury to do some shopping. As her car pulled out and we got back to work, Dad did a jokey sigh. 'Women, eh? Banging on about this rockery for years, and now it's off to the shops...'

Mr Broadwas did a gardener's nod. Not an ally's nod.

By the time Mum came home, Mr Broadwas, his sons, Doug and the forklift truck'd gone. Dad'd let me fill the pond with water from the hosepipe. I was playing Swingball by myself. Julia'd gone out to celebrate the end of the A-levels at Tanya's Night Club in Worcester with Kate, Ewan and some of his friends. Dad was nestling little ferny claw plants into the chinks between the rocks. 'So,' he waved his trowel, 'what's the verdict?'

'Very nice,' said Mum.

Right away, I knew she knew something we didn't.

Dad nodded. 'The boys didn't do a bad job, eh?'

'Oh, not bad at all.'

'Best garden pond in the village it'll be, Mr Broadwas said, once my shrubbery's got a grip. Have a pleasant tootle round Tewkesbury, did we?'

'Very pleasant, thank you,' said Mum, as a tubby man with joke-shop sideburns trundled a large, white, lidded wheelie bucket round from the front of the house. 'Mr Suckley, this is my husband, and that's my son, Jason. Michael, this is Mr Suckley.'

Mr Suckley gave me and Dad a 'How do'.

'That's the pond,' Mum said to him, 'please, Mr Suckley.'

Mr Suckley wheeled his bucket to the edge of the pond, balanced it there, and raised a sort of gate. Water sluiced out, slooshing with it a pair of enormous fish. Not the tiddlers you get in plastic bags from the Goose Fair. These beauts'd've cost a packet. 'The Japanese revere carp as living treasures,' Mum told us. 'They're symbols of a long life. They live for decades. They'll probably outlive us.'

Dad's nose looked very, very out of joint.

‘Oh, I know your fork-lift gizmo was an unexpected expense, Michael. But think what we saved by using granite instead of marble. And surely the best pond in the village should have the best fish? What’s the Japanese name for them again, Mr Suckley?’

Mr Suckley emptied the last dribbles into the pond. ‘Koi.’

‘Koi.’ Mum peered into the pond like a mother. ‘The long gold one’s “Moby”. The mottled one we can call “Dick”.’

Today'd been so full of stuff that Mr Suckley should've been the end. But after tea I was playing darts in the garage when the back door slammed open. 'Get a-way!' Mum's shriek was mangled with anger. 'GET AWAY, you dirty great BRUTES!'

I ran to the back garden in time to catch Mum hurling her Prince Charles and Princess Diana mug at a gigantic heron, perched on the rockery. Tea floated out like liquid in zero gravity as the missile passed through a belt of sunlit gnats. The mug exploded when it hit the rockery. The heron raised its angel's wings. Quite unhurriedly, one mighty flap at a time, it climbed into the air. Moby was flapping in its beak. 'PUT my FISH DOWN!' yelled Mum. 'You damn BIRD!'

Mr Castle's puppet head popped over the garden fence.

Mum's staring at the heron, appalled, as it shrinks into the lost blue.

Moby's flipping in the Day of Judgement light.

Dad watched all this through the kitchen window. Dad isn't laughing. He's won.

Me, I want to bloody kick this moronic bloody world in the bloody teeth over and over till it bloody understands that not hurting people is ten bloody thousand times more bloody important than being right.

Spooks

So here I was, tying cotton to Mr Blake's door knocker, cacking myself. The knocker was a roaring brass lion. Here be the fumbler who should be in

bed, and here be the beast who bites off his head. Behind me, in the playground, Ross Wilcox was willing me to balls it up. Dawn Madden sat next to him on the climbing frame. Her beautiful head was haloed by the street lamp. Who knows what she was thinking. Gilbert Swinyard and Pete Redmarley spun on the witch's hat, slowly, assessing my performance. On the high end of the seesaw perched Dean Moran. Pluto Noak weighed down the low end. His fag glowed. Pluto Noak's why I was where I was. When Mr Blake'd confiscated the football after Gilbert Swinyard'd booted it into his front garden, Noak'd said, 'If you ask me, that old git deserves a' (he'd licked the words) 'cherry-knocking.' 'Cherry-knocking' sounds a pretty term but prettiness often papers over nastiness. Knocking on a door and running off before the victim answers sounds a harmless prank, but cherry-knocking says, Are we the wind, or kids, or have we come to murder you in your bed? It says, Of all the houses in the village, why you?

Nasty, really.

Or maybe it was Ross Wilcox's fault. If he hadn't snogged Dawn Madden so tonguily, I might've sloped off home when Pluto Noak mentioned cherry-knocking. I might not've bragged how Hugo my cousin does it by tying one end of a reel of cotton to the knocker and then drives his victim crazy by knocking from a safe distance.

Wilcox'd tried to snuff the idea out. 'They'd see the thread.'

'No,' I counter-attacked, 'not if you use black, and let it go slack after knocking so it's lying along the ground.'

'How'd you know, Taylor? You've never done it.'

'I bloody have. At my cousin's. In Richmond.'

'Where the fuck's Richmond?'

'Virtually London. Ace laugh, it was, too.'

‘Should work.’ Pluto Noak spoke. ‘Trickiest part’d be tyin’ the thread in the first place.’

‘It’d take balls,’ Dawn Madden wore snakeskin jeans, ‘would that.’

‘Nah.’ I’d started it all. ‘It’s a piece of piss.’

Tying a thread to a knocker when one fumble means death is no piece of piss, however. Mr Blake had the Nine o'Clock News on. Through the open window wafted fried onion fumes and news about the war in Beirut. Rumour has it, Mr Blake's got an air rifle. He worked at a factory in Worcester that makes mining equipment but he got laid off and hasn't worked since. His wife died of leukaemia. There's a son called Martin who'd be about twenty now, but one night (so Kelly Moran told us) they had a fight and Martin's never been seen since. Someone'd got a letter from a North Sea oil rig, another from a canning factory in Alaska.

So anyway, Pluto Noak, Gilbert Swinyard and Pete Redmarley bottled out so they were pretty damn impressed when I said I'd loop the thread. But my fingers were fumbling one simple granny knot.

Done.

My throat'd gone dry.

Dead carefully, I lowered the knocker on to the brass lion.

The crucial thing was not to flunk it now, not to panic, not to think what Mr Blake and my parents'd do to me if I got caught.

I backtracked, trying not to scuff grit on the path, unspooling the cotton.

Mr Blake's prehistoric trees cast tigery shadows.

The gate's rusty hinges squeaked like glass about to shatter.

Mr Blake's window snapped open.

An air rifle went off and a pellet hit my neck.

Only when the TV noise'd deadened did I realized that the window'd snapped shut. The bullet must've been a flying beetle or something. ‘Should’ve seen your face when the window went,’ snargled Ross Wilcox as I got back to the climbing frame. ‘Shat your cacks, it looked like!’

But no one else joined in.

Pete Redmarley flobbed. ‘Least he did it, Wilcox.’

‘Aye,’ Gilbert Swinyard gobbed, ‘took guts, did that.’

Dean Moran said, ‘Nice one, Jace.’

By telepathy I told Dawn Madden, Your spazzo boyfriend hasn’t got the nerve to do that.

‘Playtime, kiddiwinkies.’ Pluto Noak swivelled off the seesaw and Moran crashed to earth and rolled into the dirt with a squawk. ‘Gi’s the thread, Jason.’ (The first time he’d called me anything but ‘Taylor’ or ‘you’.) ‘Let’s pay wankchops a call.’

Warm with this praise, I handed him the spool.

‘Let us go first, Ploot,’ said Pete Redmarley, ‘it is my cotton.’

‘Yer lyin’ thief, it ain’t yours, yer nicked it off yer old biddy.’ Pluto Noak unspooled more slack as he climbed up the slide. ‘Anyway, it takes technique, does this. Ready?’

We all nodded, and took up innocent stances.

Pluto Noak wound the thread in, then delicately tugged.

The brass lion knocker answered. One, two, three.

‘Skill,’ mumbled Pluto Noak. That skill splashed on me.

A blunt axe of silence'd killed every noise in the playground.

Pluto Noak, Swinyard and Redmarley looked at each other.

Then they looked at me too, like I was one of them.

'Yeah?' Mr Blake appeared in a rectangle of yellow. 'Hello?'

This, I thought as my blood went hotter and waterier, could backfire so shittily.

Mr Blake stepped forward. 'Anyone there?' His gaze settled on us.

'Nick Yew's dad,' Pete Redmarley spoke like we were in the middle of a discussion, 'is selling Tom's old Suzuki scrambler to Grant Burch.'

'Burch?' Wilcox snorted. 'What's he sellin' it to that cripple for?'

'Breakin' an arm,' Gilbert Swinyard told him, 'don't make no one a cripple, not in my book.'

Wilcox didn't quite dare answer back. To my delight.

All through this, Mr Blake'd been firing us this evil stare. Finally he went back in.

Pluto Noak snorted as the door closed. 'Fuckin' fierce or what?'

'Fierce,' echoed Dean Moran.

Dawn Madden bit her bottom lip and sneaked me this naked smile.

I'll tie fifty threads, I thought-telegrammed her, to fifty door knockers.

'Dozy old fucker,' mumbled Ross Wilcox. 'Must be blind as a bloody bat. He treaded on the thread, most like.'

'Why,' Gilbert Swinyard answered, 'would he even be lookin' for a thread?'

‘Gi’us a go now, Ploot,’ said Pete Redmarley.

‘Nokey-dokey, Sneaky Pete. Too much of a laugh, this. Round two?’

Mr Blake’s knocker knocked once, twice—

Immediately the door flew open and the cotton reel was jerked out of Pluto Noak’s hand. It clattered over the tarmac under the swing.

‘Right, you—’ Mr Blake snarled at the non-existent cherry-knocker who wasn’t cowering, terrified, on his doorstep, or anywhere else.

I had one of those odd moments when now isn’t now.

Mr Blake marched round his garden, trying to flush out a hiding kid.

‘So how much,’ Gilbert Swinyard asked Pete Redmarley in a loud, innocent voice, ‘are the Yews askin’ Old Burcher for that scrambler?’

‘Dunno,’ said Pete Redmarley. ‘Couple of hundred, prob’ly.’

‘Two hundred and fifty,’ Moran piped up. ‘Kelly heard Isaac Pye tell Badger Harris in the Black Swan.’

Mr Blake walked up to his gate. (I tried to keep my face half hidden and hoped he didn’t know me.) ‘Giles Noak. Might have known. Want to spend another night in Upton cop shop, do you?’

Wilcox’d grass me off, for sure, if the police got involved.

Pluto Noak leant over the side of the slide and dropped a spit-bomb.

‘You cocky little shite, Giles Noak.’

‘Talkin’ to me? I thought yer wanted that kid who just banged yer knocker and ran off.’

‘Bullshit! It was you!’

‘Flew back up here from yer door in one giant leap, did I?’

‘So who is it?’

Pluto Noak did a fuck you chuckle. ‘Who is it what?’

‘Right!’ Mr Blake took one step back. ‘I’m calling the police!’

Pluto Noak did this devastating imitation of Mr Blake. ““Officer? Roger Blake here. Yes, well-known unemployed child-beater of Black Swan Green. Listen, this boy keeps knocking on my door and running away. No, I don’t know his name. No, I haven’t actually seen him, but come and arrest him anyway. He needs a good ramming with a shiny hard truncheon! I insist on doing it myself.””

That my cherry-knocking’d led to this was horrifying.

‘After what happened to your waster of a father,’ Mr Blake’s voice’d turned poisonous, ‘you should know where human sewage ends up.’

A sneeze exploded out of Moran.

Here's a true story about Giles 'Pluto' Noak. Last autumn his then girlfriend Colette Turbot'd been invited by our art teacher Mr Dunwoody to Art Club. Art Club's after school and it's only open to kids Dunwoody invites. Colette Turbot went and found it was just her and Dunwoody. He told her to pose topless in his darkroom so he could photograph her. Colette Turbot said I don't think so, sir. Dunwoody told her if she squandered her gifts she'd waste her life marrying pillocks and working at checkouts. Colette Turbot just left. Next day Pluto Noak and another mate from Upton pork scratchings factory appeared at lunch in the staff car park. Quite a crowd gathered. Pluto Noak and his mate each got a corner of Dunwoody's Citroën and rocked it over on to its roof. 'YOU TELL THE PIGS WHAT I DONE,' he yelled at the staffroom window at the top of his voice, 'AND I'LL TELL THE PIGS WHY I DONE IT!'

Loads of people say 'I don't give a toss'. But for Pluto Noak, not giving a toss's a religion.

So anyway, Mr Blake'd taken a cautious step or two back before Pluto Noak reached his gate. ‘Talk about someone’s father like that, yer’ve gotta see it through, Roger. So let’s sort this out like men. You and me. Right now. You ain’t scared, right? Martin said you’ve got quite a talent for smashin’ up disobedient teenagers.’

‘You,’ when Mr Blake found his voice it’d gone crackly and sort of hysterical, ‘you don’t know what you’re damn well talking about.’

‘Martin knew well enough, though, didn’t he?’

‘I never laid a finger on that boy!’

‘Not a finger.’ It took me a moment to realize the next voice belonged to Dean Moran. ‘Pokers wrapped in pillowcases’s more your style, weren’t it?’ You never know with Dean Moran. ‘So it didn’t leave any marks.’

Pluto Noak pushed his advantage. ‘Glory days, eh? Rog?’

‘Poisonous little crappers!’ Mr Blake marched back to his house. ‘All of you! The police’ll mop you up quickly enough...’

‘My old man’s got his faults and I ain’t sayin’ he ain’t,’ Pluto Noak called out, ‘but he never done nothin’ to me like what you done to Martin!’

Mr Blake’s door slammed loud as a shotgun.

Wished I’d never opened my stupid gob about the cotton now.

Pluto Noak strolled back, all perky. ‘Nice shot, Moran. Fancy a zap on the old Asteroids up the Swan, me. Comin’?’

The invitation was for Redmarley and Swinyard only. Both answered, ‘Okay, Ploot.’ As they left, Pluto Noak nodded me a Well done.

‘But,’ Ross Wilcox had to say, ‘Blake’ll find the cotton in the morning.’

Pluto Noak spits at the polished June moon. ‘Good.’



Breaks at school’re normally pretty grim. Spend your break alone, you’re a No-friends Loser. Try to enter a ring of high-rank kids like Gary Drake or David Ockeridge, you risk a withering ‘What d’you want?’ Hang out with low-rank kids like Floyd Chaceley and Nicholas Briar, that means you’re one of them. Girls, like Avril Bredon’s cloakroom huddle, aren’t much of a solution. True, you don’t have to prove yourself so much with girls, and they definitely smell better. But pretty soon someone’ll start a rumour that you fancy one of them. Hearts and initials’ll appear on blackboards.

I try to spend my breaks on journeys between changing destinations, so at least I always look like I've got somewhere to be.

But today was different. Kids came seeking me out. They wanted to know if I'd really tied cotton to the Roger Blake's front door. A certain reputation as a bit of a hard-knock's useful, but not if teachers notice. So I told each kid, 'Ah, you can't believe everything you hear, you know.' A skill answer, that. It meant, Of course it's true as well as Why would I want to talk to you about it?

'Far out,' they told me. Saying that's a craze right now.

At the tuck shop Neal Brose was with the sixth-form prefects behind the counter. (Neal Brose managed to get special permission by persuading Mr Kempsey he wanted to learn about the business world.) Neal Brose's been giving me the cold shoulder this term, but today he called out, 'What'll it be, Jace?'

His friendliness made my mind go blank. 'Double Decker?'

A Double Decker flew at my face. I raised a hand to stop it. The chocolate bar landed there, moulded to my hand, perfectly.

Loads of kids saw it.

Neal Brose jerked his thumb to tell me to pay round the side. But when I held out my 15p he just did this sly grin and closed my fingers round my coins so it looked like he'd taken them. He shut the door before I could argue. No Double Decker ever tasted so good. No nougat ever so snowy. No curranty clag ever so crumbly and sweet.

Then Duncan Priest and Mark Badbury appeared with a tennis ball. Mark Badbury asked, 'Game of slam?' Like we'd been best mates for years.

'Okay,' I said.

‘Okay!’ said Duncan Priest. ‘Slam’s better with three.’

Art was with the same Mr Dunwoody whose car Pluto Noak'd turtled over last year. Mr Nixon'd stepped in to save his bacon, to avoid a scandal, so Julia reckons. Nothing happened to Pluto Noak and Mr Dunwoody came to school with Miss Gilver until his Citroën was repaired. They'd make a good husband and wife, we reckon. They both hate humans.

So anyway, Mr Dunwoody's face is fitted around his ginormous conk. He reeks of Vick's Inhaler. Only a fellow stammerer'd notice his tiny slips on T-words. His art room's got a clayey smell, for some reason. We never use clay. Mr Dunwoody uses the kiln as a cupboard and the darkroom's a mysterious zone only Art Club members get to see. From the art room window you've got a view over the playing fields, so high-ranking kids bags those seats. Alastair Nurton saved me one. A solar system of hot-air balloons hung over the Malverns, over the perfect afternoon.

Today's lesson was on the Golden Mean. A Greek called Archimedes, Mr Dunwoody said, worked out the correct place to put a tree and the horizon in any picture. Mr Dunwoody showed us how to find the Golden Mean using proportions and a ruler, but none of us really got it, not even Clive Pike. Mr Dunwoody did this Why am I wasting my life? expression. He pinched the bridge of his nose and massaged his temples. 'Four years at the Royal Academy for this. Out with your pencils. Out with your rulers.'

In my pencil case I found a note that sent the art room spinning.

**the
GRAVEYARD
8 Tonite
spooks**

One number and four words'd just changed my life.

By the time you're thirteen, gangs're babyish, like dens or Lego. But Spooks is more a secret society. Dean Moran's dad said Spooks started years ago as a sort of secret union for farmhands. If an employer didn't pay what he owed, say, the Spooks'd all go round to get justice. Half the men in the Black Swan'd've been members in those days. It's changed since then, but it's still dead secret. Actual Spooks never talk about it. Pete Redmarley and Gilbert Swinyard were in it, me and Moran reckoned, and Pluto Noak had to be a leader. Ross Wilcox boasted he was a member, which means he isn't. John Tookey is. One time he got pushed about by some skinheads at a disco in Malvern Link. Next Friday about twenty Spooks, including Tom Yew, rode up there on bikes and motorbikes. All the versions of what happened end with the same skinheads being made to lick John Tookey's boots. That's just one story. There's a hundred others.

My bravery last night obviously must've impressed the right people. Pluto Noak, most like. But who'd delivered the note? I put it in my blazer pocket and scanned the class for a knowing look. Nothing from Gary Drake, or Neal Brose. David Ockeridge and Duncan Priest're popular, but they live out Castlemorton and Corse Lawn way. Spooks is a Black Swan Green thing.

Some second-year girls jogged below the window in training for Sports Day. Mr Carver shook his hockey stick at a passing pack like Man Friday. Lucy Sneads's tits bounced like twin Noddies.

Who cares who slipped me the note? I thought, watching Dawn Madden's coffee-cream calves. It got there.

'Pearls before swine!' Mr Dunwoody snorted on his Vick's Inhaler.
'Pearls before swine!'

Mum was on the phone to Aunt Alice when I got home but she gave me this sunny wave. Wimbledon was on TV with the sound turned down. Summer gusted through the open house. I made a glass of Robinson's Barley Water and made one for Mum too. 'Oh,' she said when I put it by the phone, 'what a thoughtful son I've raised!' Mum'd bought Maryland Chocolate Chip Cookies. They're new and totally lush. I grabbed five, went upstairs, changed, lay on my bed, ate the biscuits, put on 'Mr Blue Sky' by ELO and played it five or six times, guessing what test the Spooks'd set me. There's always a test. Swim across the lake in the woods, climb the quarry down Pig Lane, go nightcreeping across some back gardens. Who cares? I'd do it. If I was a Spook, every day'd be as epic as today.

The record stopped. I sifted through the afternoon's sounds.

Spaghetti bolognese is mince, spaghetti and a blob of ketchup, normally. But Mum did a proper recipe this evening, and it wasn't even anyone's birthday. Dad, Julia and me guessed the ingredients in turn. Wine, aubergines (rubbery but not pukesome), mushrooms, carrot, red pepper, garlic, onions, toe-flake cheese and this red dust called paprika. Dad talked about how spices used to be like gold or oil nowadays. Clippers and schooners brought them back from Jakarta, Peking and Japan. Dad said how in those days Holland was as powerful as the USSR is today. Holland! (Often I think boys don't become men. Boys just get papier-mâchéed inside a man's mask. Sometimes you can tell the boy is still in there.) Julia talked about her afternoon in the solicitor's office in Malvern. She's doing a summer job there, filing, answering the phone and typing letters. She's saving to go on holiday with Ewan in August on an Interrail. You pay £175 and can go anywhere on the trains in Europe for free for a month. Acropolis at dawn. Moon over Lake Geneva.

Jammy thing.

So anyway, it was Mum's turn. 'You won't believe who was at Penelope Melrose's today.'

'I completely forgot to ask.' Dad's trying harder to be nice these days.
'How was it? Who was it?'

'Penny's fine – but she'd only invited Yasmin Morton-Bagot along.'

"“Yasmin Morton-Bagot”? That's got to be a made-up name.'

'Nobody made her name up, Michael. She was at our wedding.'

'Was she?'

'Penny and Yasmin and I were inseparable, during our college days.'

'The fairer sex, Jason,' Dad gave me a crafty nod, 'hunt in packs.'

It felt all right to smile back.

‘Right, Dad,’ Julia remarked, ‘unlike the unfairer sex, you mean?’

Mum pushed on. ‘Yasmin gave us the Venetian wineglasses.’

‘Oh, those things! The spiky ones without a base so you can’t put them down? Are they still taking up loft space?’

‘I’m rather surprised you don’t remember her better. She’s very striking. Her husband – Bertie – was a semi-professional golfer.’

‘Was he?’ Dad was impressed. ““Was”?”

‘Yes. He celebrated going professional by shacking up with a physiotherapist. Cleared out the joint bank accounts. Didn’t leave poor Yasmin a bean.’

Dad went all Clint Eastwood. ‘What sort of a man does that?’

‘It was the making of her. She went into interior design.’

Dad sucked air through his teeth. ‘Risky venture.’

‘Her first shop in Mayfair was such a hit, she opened another one in Bath within a year. She’s not one to name-drop, but she’s done work for the royals. She’s staying with Penny at the moment, to open a third shop in Cheltenham. This one has a big gallery space, too, for exhibitions. But she’s been let down by the manageress she’d originally hired to manage it.’

‘Staff! Always the tricky part of the equation. I was telling Danny Lawlor just the other day, if—’

‘Yasmin offered me the job, you see.’

A very surprised silence.

‘Fantastic, Mum,’ Julia beamed, ‘that’s just brilliant!’

‘Thank you, sweetheart.’

Dad’s lips smiled. ‘Certainly, it’s a very flattering offer, Helena.’

‘I ran Freda Henbrook’s boutique in Chelsea for eighteen months.’

‘That funny little place where you worked after college?’

‘Mum’s got a fabulous eye,’ Julia told Dad, ‘for colours and textiles and stuff. And she’s great with people. She’ll charm them into buying anything.’

‘Nobody’s denying it!’ Dad did a jokey-surrender gesture. ‘I’m sure this Yasmin Turton-Bigot person wouldn’t have—’

‘Morton-Bagot. Yasmin Morton-Bagot.’

‘—wouldn’t have floated the idea if she had any doubts, but—’

‘Yasmin’s a born entrepreneur. She hand-picks her staff.’

‘And...you said...what, to her?’

‘She’s calling Monday for my decision.’

The bell-ringers in St Gabriel’s began their weekly practice.

‘Only, it’s not in any way a pyramid selling thing, is it, Helena?’

‘It’s a gallery and interiors thing, Michael.’

‘And you did discuss terms? It isn’t all commission?’

‘Yasmin pays salaries, just like Greenland Supermarkets. I thought you’d be pleased at the prospect of me having an income. You won’t have to shell out hills of money on my whims any more. I can afford them myself.’

‘I am. I’m pleased. Of course I am.’

Black cows’d gathered in the field, just over our fence, past the rockery.

‘So, you’d be travelling to and from Cheltenham every day, would you? Six days a week?’

‘Five. Once I’ve hired an assistant, it’d be four. Cheltenham’s a lot closer than Oxford or London or all the places you manage to get to.’

‘It’ll mean pretty major adjustments to our lifestyles.’

‘They’re happening anyway. Julia’s off to university. Jason’s not a baby any more.’

My family chose this moment to look at me. ‘I’m pleased too, Mum.’

‘Thank you, darling.’

(Thirteen is too old to be a ‘darling’.)

Julia urged her, ‘You are going to take it, right?’

‘I’m tempted.’ Mum did this shy smile. ‘Being stuck in the house every day is—’

““Stuck”?” Dad did an amused squeak. ‘Believe you me, there’s no “stuck” like being stuck to a shop, day in, day out.’

‘A gallery, with a shop. And at least I’d meet people.’

Dad looked genuinely puzzled. ‘You know dozens of people.’

Mum looked genuinely puzzled. ‘Who?’

‘Dozens! Alice, for one.’

‘Alice has a house, a family and a part-time business. In Richmond. Half a day away by glorious British Rail.’

‘Our neighbours are nice.’

‘Certainly. But we haven’t the blindest thing in common.’

‘But...all your friends in the village?’

‘Michael, we have lived here since just after Jason was born, but we are townies. Oh, they’re polite, for the most part. In front of us. But...’

(I checked my Casio. My appointment with Spooks was soon.)

‘Mum’s right.’ Julia toyed with the Egyptian ankh necklace Ewan’d given her. ‘Kate says if you haven’t lived in Black Swan Green since the War of the Roses, you’ll never be a local.’

Dad looked shirty, like we’d deliberately refused to get his point.

Mum took a deep breath. ‘I’m lonely. It’s that simple.’

The cows swished their tails at the fat flies around their dungy arses.

Graveyards're sardined with rotting bodies, so of course they're scary places. A bit. But few things're only one thing if you think about them long enough. Last summer on sunny days I cycled as far as Ordnance Survey Map 150'd let me. Even Winchcombe, one time. If I found a Norman (rounded) or Saxon (stumpy) church with no one else around, I'd hide my bike round the back and lie down in the graveyard grass. Invisible birds, the odd flower in a jam jar. No Excalibur stuck in a stone, but I did find a tombstone from 1665. 1665 was the plague year. That was my record. Gravestones mostly flake away after a couple of centuries. Even death sort of dies. The saddest sentence ever I found in a graveyard on Bredon Hill.
HER ABUNDANT VIRTUES WOULD HAVE ADORNED A LONGER LIFE. Burying people's a question of fashion, too, like flares and drainpipe trousers. Yew trees grow in graveyards 'cause the Devil hates the smell of yew, Mr Broadwas told me. I don't know if I believe that, but Weejee boards're definitely real. There're stacks of stories where the glass spells out something like 'S-A-T-A-N-I-S-Y-O-U-R-M-A-S-T-E-R', shatters, then the kids have to call a vicar. (Grant Burch got possessed one time and told Philip Phelps he was going to die on 2 August 1985. Philip Phelps won't go to sleep now unless there's a Bible under his pillow.)

People're always buried facing west so at the end of time when the Last Trumpet blows, all the dead people'll claw their way up and walk due west to the Throne of Jesus to be judged. From Black Swan Green that means the Throne of Jesus'll be in Aberystwyth. Suicides, mind, get buried facing north. They won't be able to find Jesus 'cause dead people only walk in straight lines. They'll all end up in John o' Groats. Aberystwyth's a bit of a dive, but Dad says John o' Groats's just a few houses where Scotland runs out of Scotland.

Isn't no god better than one who does that to people?

In case Spooks were spying on me, I did an ace SAS roll. But St Gabriel's graveyard was deserted. Bell-ringing practice was still going on. Close up, bells don't really peal but tip, trip, dranggg and baloooooom. Quarter past eight came and went. A breeze picked up and the two giant redwoods creaked their bones. Half past eight. The bells stopped and didn't start. Quietness rings loud as ringing at first. I began worrying about time. Tomorrow's a Saturday, but if I wasn't home in an hour or so, I'd be getting a hell of a What time do you call this? Nine or ten bell-ringers left the church, talking about someone called Malcolm who'd joined the Moonies and'd last been seen giving away flowers in Coventry. The bell-ringers drifted through the lych-gate, and their voices floated off towards the Black Swan.

I noticed a kid sat on the graveyard wall. Too small for Pluto Noak. Too scrawny for Grant Burch or Gilbert Swinyard or Pete Redmarley. Silent as a Ninja, I sneaked up on him. He wore an army baseball cap with the flap turned back, like Nick Yew.

I knew Nick Yew'd be a Spook.

'All right, Nick.'

But it was Dean Moran who went Gaaa! and dropped off the wall.

Moran jumped up from a pond of nettles, swatting his arms, legs and neck. ‘These bastard stingers’ve stinged me like bastards!’ Moran knew he looked too much of a tit to get bolshy. ‘What’re you doing here?’

‘What’re you doing here?’

‘Got a note, didn’t I? Invitation to join—’ You can see Moran think. ‘Eh. You’re never a Spook, are yer?’

‘No. I thought...you were.’

‘Then this note in my pencil case?’

He unscrumpled a note identical to mine.

Moran read my confusion right. ‘You got a note too?’

‘Yeah.’ This development was confusing, disappointing and worrying. Confusing ’cause Dean Moran’s just not Spooks material. Disappointing ’cause what was the point of joining the Spooks if losers like Moran’re being recruited too? Worrying ’cause this smelt like a wind-up.

Moran grinned. ‘That’s brilliant, Jace!’ I pulled him back on to the wall. ‘Spooks havin’ both of us, at the same time, like.’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘Brilliant.’

‘They must reckon we’re a natural team. Like Starsky and Hutch.’

‘Yeah.’ I looked round the graveyard for signs of Wilcox.

‘Or Torvill and Dean. I knows yer like those little spangly skirts.’

‘Bloody hilarious.’

Venus swung bright from the ear of the moon.

‘D’you think,’ Moran asked, ‘they’re really comin’?’

‘Told us to be here, didn’t they?’

A muffled trumpet sounded from one of the glebe cottages.

‘Yeah, but...yer don’t think it’s a wind-up?’

Making us wait might be some sort of secret test. If Moran gives up, pointed out Maggot, you’ll look a better Spook. ‘Go home, if you think so.’

‘No, I didn’t mean that. I just meant...hey! Shooting star!’

‘Where?’

‘There!’

‘Nope.’ If you have to learn it from a book, Moran doesn’t know it. ‘It’s a satellite. It isn’t burning out. See? Just going in a straight line. Might be that Skylab space station, losing altitude. No one knows where it’ll crash.’

‘But how come—’

‘Shush!’

There’s a wilder corner where broken slabs’re stacked under corkscrewed holly. Mutterings there, I heard, for sure. Now I smelt cigarettes. Moran followed me, saying, ‘What is it?’ (God, Moran can be a pillock.) I stooped to enter this tent of dark green. Pluto Noak sat on one stack of old headstones, Grant Burch on a pile of roof tiles, John Tookey on a third. Wished I could’ve told them it was me and not Moran who’d spotted them. Even saying ‘Hello’ to hard kids is gay so I just said, ‘All right?’

Pluto Noak, Lord of Spooks, nodded back.

‘Ooops.’ Stooping Moran head-butted my arse and I stumbled forward.
‘Soz, Jace.’

I told Moran, ‘Don’t say “soz”.’

‘So you knows the rules?’ Grant Burch flobbed. ‘Yer gets a leggy over this wall, then yer’ve got fifteen minutes to get across the six back gardens. Once yer done, yer legs it to the green. Swinyard ’n’ Redmarley’ll be waitin’ under the oak. If yer in time, welcome to the Spooks. If yer late, or if yer don’t show, yer ain’t Spooks and yer never will be.’

Moran and me nodded.

‘And if yer caught,’ added John Tookey, ‘yer ain’t Spooks.’

‘And,’ Grant Burch pointed a warning finger, ‘and, if yer caught, you ain’t never even heard of Spooks.’

I defied my nerves and Hangman to say, ‘What’s “Spooks”, Ploot?’

Pluto Noak granted me an encouraging snort.

The holly shivered just as St Gabriel’s chimed a quarter to nine. ‘Starting positions!’ Grant Burch looked at me and Moran. ‘Who’s first?’

‘Me,’ I said, without glancing at Moran. ‘I ain’t chicken.’

The back garden of the first cottage was just a marsh of trifidy weeds. Straddling the wall, I gave the four faces in the graveyard one last glance, swung over and plummeted into long grass. The house said, They've gone. No lights, an unfixed drainpipe, slack net curtains. All the same, I crept low. Some squatter might be watching, with the lights turned off. With a crossbow. (That's the difference between me and Moran. Moran'd just tromp across like he owned the place. Moran never takes snipers into account.) I climbed up the plum tree that grew by the next wall.

A coat rustled, just above my head.

Idiot. Just a placky bag, flapping in the branches. That trumpet started up again, dead close now. I slithered off a knobbly branch and balanced on the next wall. A doddle so far. Better yet, the flat roof of the next garden's oil tank was just a foot below me, and screened by coal-blue conifers.

The tank boooooomed, thunder underfoot.

The second back garden was miles dodgier. The curtains and even half the windows were open. Two fat ladies sat on a sofa watching Asterixes and Obelixes on the European It's a Knockout. The TV commentator Stuart Hall was laughing like a Harrier jump jet taking off. The garden had no cover. A badminton net dropped over the threadbare lawn, that was it. Plasticky bats, bowls, an archery target and a paddling pool lay littered, all dead cheap and Woolworths-looking. Worse, a camper van was parked round the side. This roly-poly guy with an upside-down face was playing his trumpet in it. His cheeks swelled bullfroggishly but his gaze was fixed down his garden.

Notes went up.

Notes went down.

Three whole minutes must've gone by. I didn't know what to do.

The back door opened and a fat lady trotted over to the van. As she opened the door, she said, ‘Vicky’s sleepin’.’ The trumpeter pulled her in, threw down his trumpet, and they started snogging as hungrily as two dogs attacking a box of Milk Tray. The camper van began to vibrate.

I dropped off the oil tank, slipped on a golf ball, got up, dashed over the lawn, fell over an invisible croquet hoop, got up, then misjudged my jump on to the fence-beam. My foot made a splintering whack!

You’re bacon, stated Unborn Twin.

I swung myself over the fence and fell to earth like a sack of logs.

The third cottage was where Mr Broadwas lives. If Mr Broadwas saw me, he'd phone my dad and I'd be dismembered by midnight. Sprinklers swwsss-swwsss-swwwsssed. Drops swept my face where I sat. Most of the garden was hidden by a screen of runner beans.

I had another problem. In the trumpeter's garden behind me, a woman's voice called out. 'Come back, Gerry! It's only them foxes again!'

'Tain't no fox! It's one o' them kids!'

Two hands, right above my head, gripped the fence.

I sprinted to the end of the runner beans. I froze.

Mr Broadwas sat on the doorstep. Water chundered into a metal watering can from a tap.

Panic swarmed up me like wasps in a tin.

The woman's voice behind me said, 'It's a fox, Gerry! Ted shot one last week what he thought was the Beast o' Dartmoor first off.'

'Oh aye?' The hands left the top of the fence. One hand appeared in a hole my foot'd punched through the fence. 'A fox did this, did it?'

Once again, the trumpeter's fingers appeared on top. The fence groaned as he prepared to heave himself up.

Mr Broadwas hadn't heard 'cause of the water noise, but now he put down his pipe on the step, and stood up.

Trapped, trapped, trapped. Dad'd murder me.

'Mandy?' A new voice came from the garden behind me. 'Gerry?'

'Oh, Vicks,' said the first woman. 'We heard a strange noise.'

‘I was practisin’ my trumpet,’ said the man, ‘and I heard a funny sound, so I came out to take a gander.’

‘Oh aye? Then what’s this?’

Mr Broadwas turned his back to me.

The fence ahead was too high to jump over, with no finger-holds.

‘I CAN SMELL HIM ON YER! I CAN SEE YER LIPPY!’

Mr Broadwas closed off the tap.

‘IT’S NOT LIPSTICK, YER CRAZY BINT,’ screamed the trumpeter over the fence, ‘IT’S JAM!’

My dad’s gardener walked up to where I crouched, water sloshing in his can. His eyes met mine but he didn’t look remotely surprised.

‘I came in to find a tennis ball,’ I blurted.

‘The easiest way is down behind the shed.’

This didn’t sink in at first.

‘You’re wasting precious time,’ added Mr Broadwas, turning to his row of onions.

‘Thanks,’ I gulped, realizing that he knew I’d lied but was letting me off scot-free anyway. I dashed down the path and around the corner of the shed. The air in the gap was heavy with fresh creosote fumes. Mr Broadwas must’ve been a Spook when he was younger too, then.

‘I WISH MUM’D DROWNED YER IN WORCESTER CANAL!’ The second woman’s scream sliced the cool murk. ‘BOTH OF YER! IN A SACK FULL O’ STONES!’

The moon-rocky fourth garden was a spillage of concrete meringue and gravel. Ornaments everywhere. Not just gnomes, but Egyptian sphinxes, Smurfs, fairies, sea otters, Pooh Bear and Piglet and Eeyore, Jimmy Carter's face, you name it. Himalayas divided the garden down the middle at shoulder height. This sculpted garden'd once been a local legend and so had its creator, Arthur Evesham. The Malvern Gazetteer'd printed photos with the headline THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE GNOME. Miss Throckmorton'd brought our class to have a look. A smiley man'd served us all Ribena and iced biscuits with pin-men doing sports on them. Arthur Evesham'd died of a heart attack a few days after our visit, in fact. That was the first time I'd heard 'heart attack' and I thought it meant your heart suddenly went crazy and attacked the rest of your body like a ferret down a rabbit warren. You sometimes see Mrs Evesham in Mr Rhydd's, buying old people's groceries like Duraglit and that toothpaste that tastes of Germolene.

So anyway, Arthur Evesham's kingdom'd uglified since his death. A Statue of Liberty lay like a dropped murder weapon. Pooh Bear looked like an acid attack victim. The world unmakes stuff faster than people can make it. Jimmy Carter's nose'd fallen off. I pocketed it, just because. The one sign of life was a candle in an upstairs window. I walked up the Great Wall of China and almost debagged myself on Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing, pointing up to the evening moon. Beyond was a tiny square of lawn set in a bed of mint imperial pebbles. I jumped on to this grass.

And sank up to my dick in cold water.

You prat, laughed Unborn Twin, you ponce you pillock you plonker.

Water sluiced out of my trouser legs as I scrambled out of the pond. Tiny leaves clung to me like globules of sick. Mum'll go apeshit when she sees. But I had to put that out of my mind, 'cause over the very next fence waited the most dangerous garden of all.

The good news was, Mr Blake's garden was empty of Mr Blake and the far side had monkey-puzzle trees and sword plants. Excellent cover for a Spook. The bad news was, a greenhouse ran the entire length of the garden, right under the fence. A ten-foot-high, unstable fence, quivering under my weight. I'd have to inch along the fence in a sitting position, till I was right at Mr Blake's living-room window. If I fell, it was smash through a glass pane and slam on a concrete floor. Unless I got impaled on a tomato cane, like the priest in *The Omen* who gets spiked by a falling lightning conductor.

I had no choice.

The splintery fence-top sawed my bum and palms as I inched along it. My pond-soaked jeans were clammy-heavy. I nearly fell. If Mr Blake's face appeared in any of the windows, I was dead meat. I nearly fell again.

I cleared the greenhouse and jumped down.

The slab made a kerklonky noise. Luckily for me the only person in Mr Blake's lounge was Dustin Hoffman in *Kramer versus Kramer*. (We'd seen it on holiday in Oban. Julia'd sobbed all the way through and called it the greatest film ever made.) Mr Blake's lounge was sort of womanly, for a man who lives alone. Lacy lamps, pottery milkmaids and paintings of African grasslands you buy on the stairs at Littlewoods, if you really want to. His wife must've bought it all before she caught leukaemia. I crept under the kitchen window and then down the garden in the far shrubbery till I got to a water butt. I don't know why I looked back at the house right then, but I did.

Mr Blake, gazing out of an upstairs window. Sixty seconds before there'd've been no way he wouldn't've seen me balancing on his fence. (Winning needs luck and bravery. I hoped Moran had fat reserves of both.) A Rolling Stones tongue sticker on the window pane'd resisted all attempts to scrape it off. Ghosts of other stickers surrounded that one. It must've been his son Martin's room, once upon a time.

Creased Mr Blake just stared out. What at?

Not me. I was hidden by leaves.

Into his own reflected eyes?

But Mr Blake's eyes were holes.

The last garden was Mervyn Hill's. Squelch's dad's only a dustman but his garden's like a National Trust property. 'Cause it was the end glebe cottage, it spread out more. A crazy-paving path climbed up to a bench under a trellisy arch of roses. Through the French windows I saw Squelch playing Twister with two younger kids and a man I guessed was their dad. Must be visitors. Squelch's dad spun the spinner. Past the sofa was a TV showing the very end of Kramer versus Kramer where the kid's mum comes to take him away. I plotted my route. A cinch. A compost heap on the far side'd let me vault over the wall. Crouching, I ran towards the trellisy arch. The roses brewed the air. 'Shush up,' a shadow-woman sat on the bench five feet away from me, 'ooh, yer little tyke!'

'Aw,' said her shadow-friend, 'littl'un kicking again, love?'

(I couldn't believe they hadn't heard me.)

'Ow, ow, ow...' Huff. 'She's excited to hear yer, Mum. Here, touch the bump...'

The gap between the trellis arch and the back wall was wide enough to hide me, but too thorny to let me pass.

'You was a proper little acrobat, too, love,' said the older shadow, 'now I think back.' (I recognized Squelch's mum.) 'Cartwheels and kung-fu it was. Merv was always quieter, truth be told, even before he was out.'

'Shan't be sorry when this little miss decides it's time. I ain't half fed up of bein' a whale on legs.'

(Oh God. A pregnant woman. One thing everyone knows about them is if you give them a shock the baby pops out too early. Then the kid might be a retard like Squelch and it'd be my fault.)

'So you're still sure she's a girl?'

‘Eleanor in Accounts, right, she did her test. Looped my weddin’ ring through a strand of my hair and hung it over my palm. If it swings, yer baby’s a boy. Mine loop-the-looped, so she’s a girl.’

‘So that old one’s still doing the rounds, is it?’

‘Eleanor says she’s never been wrong yet.’

(My Casio said my time was nearly up.)

The game of Twister collapsed into a mound of crushed bodies, bent arms and wriggling feet. ‘Look at that rabble!’ Squelch’s mum tutted, pleased.

‘Ben’s so sorry his mate in the warehouse at Kay’s Catalogues said no, Mum. About when Merv leaves school, I mean.’

‘Can’t be helped, love. Nice of Ben to try.’

(Time, throbbed my Casio, time. I care too much, that’s my problem. The whole point about being a Spook is that you’re so hard you don’t care.)

‘I do worry what’ll become of Merv, though. Specially when Bill and I, y’know, well, aren’t around any longer.’

‘Mum! Will you listen to yourself?’

‘Merv can’t think of his future, can he? Merv can’t think past the day after tomorrow.’

‘He’s always got me and Ben, if it comes to it.’

‘You’ll have three of yer own to look after soon, won’t yer? Merv’s gettin’ more of an handful as time goes by, not less. Did Bill say? Found him in his bedroom one day last week flickin’ through one o’ them Penthouses. Bare naked ladies and that. That stage.’

‘I s’pose it’s only natural, Mum. All boys do it.’

'I know, Jacks, but in, y'know, an ordinary boy, that sort of thing, it finds an outlet. Courtin' girls and that. I love Merv but what girl'll want to walk out with a lad like him? How'd he support a family? Merv's neither fish nor fowl, see. Ain't backward enough when it comes to allowances and whatnot, ain't quick enough on his pegs for jobs like shuntin' boxes in Kay's Catalogues.'

'Ben said that's only 'cause they ain't hirin'. The recession and that.'

'Tragic part is, Merv's craftier by half than what he makes out he is. It suits Merv to act the village idiot, 'cause all the other kids expect it.'

A moon-grey cat crossed the lawn. The chimes'd start any second.

'Ben says the pork scratchings factory down Upton'll have anyone. They even took Giles Noak, after his old man got sent down.'

(I'd never thought of that. Squelch was just this kid you laugh at. But think about Squelch aged twenty, or thirty. Think about what his mum does for him, every single day. Squelch aged fifty, or seventy. What'd happen to him? What's so funny about that?)

'I dare say the pork scratchings might, love, but that don't change—'

'Jackie?' The young dad called out from the French windows. 'Jacks!'

I squeezed between the trellis and the wall.

'What is it, Ben? We're up here! On the bench.'

Roses, thorny as orcs, sank their teeth into my chest and face.

'Is Wendy with yer? Merv got too excited again. Had one of his little accidents...'

'A whole ten minutes,' mumbled Squelch's mum. 'Must be a record. All right, Ben!' She got to her feet. 'I'm comin'!'

When Squelch's mum and his pregnant sister were halfway to the house, St Gabriel bonged the first chime of nine o'clock. I dashed to the wall and bounded on to the compost heap. Instead of springboarding up, I sank into the rotting mush right up to my middle. There's a type of nightmare where the ground's your enemy.

The second chime bonged.

I struggled out of the compost heap and over the last wall, dangled in limbo as the third chime bonged, then dropped on to the drive that runs down the side of Mr Rhydd's shop. Then, in my soggy compost-covered jeans, I legged it over the crossroads and qualified for Spooks with not two minutes to spare but two chimes.

As I knelt at the feet of the oak, my breathing grated like a rusty saw. I couldn't even pick the thorns from my socks. But right there, right then, I felt happier than I could remember being. Ever.

'You, my son,' Gilbert Swinyard slapped my back, 'are one boney fide Spook!'

'No one ever cut it that fine, mind!' Grant Burch did a goblin cackle. 'Three seconds to spare!'

Pete Redmarley sat cross-legged, smoking. 'Thought you'd bottled out.' Pete Redmarley is never shocked and he's already got a half-decent moustache. He's never told me he thinks I'm a gay snob but I know that's what he thinks.

'You was wrong, then,' stated Gilbert Swinyard. (Being stuck up for by a kid like Gilbert Swinyard's exactly the point of being in Spooks.) 'Christ, Taylor! What happened to yer trousers?'

'Stepped into...' I gasped, still desperate for oxygen. '...Arthur Evesham's bastard pond...'

Even Pete Redmarley smirked at that.

'Then...' I began laughing too. '...fell into Squelch's compost heap...'

Pluto Noak jogged up. 'Did he do it?'

'Aye,' said Gilbert Swinyard, 'by the skin of his teeth.'

'Just moments left, he had,' said Grant Burch.

'There were—' I just stopped myself saluting Pluto Noak. 'There was loads of people still around in their gardens.'

“Course there are. It ain’t dark yet. Knew you’d do it, though.” Pluto Noak slapped my shoulder. (Dad did that when I learnt to dive, just the once.) ‘Knew it. A celebration is in order.’ Pluto Noak stuck his arse out, like he was sitting on a phantom motorbike. His right foot kicked it into life. As Pluto Noak’s hand revved up, this stunning Harley-Davidson fart roared out of his arse. Fraping up through four gears for three, five, ten seconds.

Us Spooks pissed ourselves.

The noise of a fence collapsing and a kid falling through glass carries a long way at twilight. Gilbert Swinyard's joke about a baby in a microwave died on his lips. The other Spooks looked at me as if I'd know what the noise meant, which I did. 'Blake's greenhouse.'

'Moran?' Grant Burch sniggered. 'He's broken it?'

'Fallen through it.' (Burch's snigger died.) 'Ten, twelve foot.'

The bell-ringers now came swaying out of the Black Swan singing about a cat who crept into a crypt and crapped and crept out again.

'Moron Moran,' rhymed Pluto Noak. 'Hide up yer warren.'

'That dozy fuck-up,' said Pete Redmarley. 'I knew he was a mistake.' He scowled at the other Spooks. 'We didn't need any new Spooks.' (That meant me, too.) 'Might as well invite Squelch in, next.'

'Better be off, any road.' Gilbert Swinyard got up. 'All of us.'

A fact sunk a hook into me. If I'd fallen through Mr Blake's greenhouse and not Moran, Moran wouldn't be abandoning me to that psycho. He just wouldn't.

Keep your fat trap shut, ordered Maggot.

'Ploot?'

Pluto Noak and the Spooks turned round.

'Isn't anyone going to...' (saying this was miles more difficult than running across people's back gardens) '...make sure Moran's' (Hangman jammed 'not hurt') 'I mean, what if he's bust a leg or...cut to bits on glass?'

'Blake'll call an ambulance,' said Grant Burch.

'But shouldn't we...y'know...'

‘No, Taylor.’ Pluto Noak looked thuggish now. ‘I do not know.’

‘That dildo knew our rules.’ Pete Redmarley spat. ‘Yer gets caught, yer on yer own. You go knockin’ on Blake’s door after this, Jason Taylor, and it’ll be what and why and who and the third fuckin’ degree and Spooks’ll get named and we ain’t havin’ that. We was here long before you ever set foot in this village.’

‘I wasn’t going to—’

‘Good.’ Cause Black Swan Green ain’t London or Richmond or wherever the fuck. Black Swan Green ain’t got space for secrets. You go knockin’ on Roger Blake’s door, we’ll know about it.’

The wind riffled the ten thousand pages of the oak tree.

‘Yeah, sure,’ I protested, ‘I just—’

‘You ain’t clapped eyes on Moran tonight.’ Pluto Noak jabbed a stubby finger at me. ‘You ain’t seen us. You ain’t heard of Spooks.’

‘Taylor,’ Grant Burch gave me my last warning, ‘go home, okay?’

So here I am, two doubled-back minutes later, eye to eye with Mr Blake's door knocker, cacking myself. Mr Blake is shouting inside the house. He's not bollocking Moran. He's on the phone, shouting about an ambulance. As soon as Mr Blake hangs up the phone I'm going to bang this knocker till he lets me in. This is just the beginning. I realize something about all the suicides traipsing north, north, north to a nowhere place where the highlands melt into the sea.

It's not a curse, or a punishment.

It's what they want.

Solarium

'OPEN UP! OPEN UP!' holler door knockers. 'OR I'LL BLOW YOUR HOUSE DOWN!' Bells're shyer. Bells're 'Hello? Anyone home?' The vicarage had a knocker and a bell and I'd tried both, but still nobody answered. I waited. Perhaps the vicar was putting his quill in his inkpot, huffing, 'Gracious, three o'clock already?' I pressed my ear to the door but the big old house gave nothing away. Sunshine flooded the thirsty lawn, flowers blazed, trees drowsed in the breeze. A dusty Volvo estate sat in the garage needing a wash and wax. (Volvos're the only famous Swedish thing 'cept for ABBA. Volvos've got roll-bars so you don't get Garibaldi-biscuated if a juggernaut slams you down a motorway embankment.)

I was half hoping nobody'd answer. The vicarage's a serious place, the opposite of where kids should be. But when I'd crept here under cover of darkness last week, an envelope'd been Sellotaped over the letter box. FOR THE ATTENTION OF ELIOT BOLIVAR, POET. Inside was a short letter written in

lilac ink on slate-grey paper. It invited me to come to the vicarage to discuss my work at three o'clock on Sunday. 'Work'. Nobody's ever called Eliot Bolivar's poems 'work'.

I kicked a pebble down the drive.

A bolt slid like a rifle and an old man opened up. His skin was as blotched as a dying banana. He wore a collarless shirt and braces. ‘Good afternoon?’

‘Hi, uh, hello.’ (I meant to say ‘Good afternoon’ but Hangman’s keen on G-words lately.) ‘Are you the vicar?’

The man glanced round the garden, as if I might be a decoy. ‘I am certainly not a vicar. Why?’ A foreign accent, sourer than French. ‘Are you?’

I shook my head. (Hangman wouldn’t even let me say ‘No’.) ‘But the vicar invited me.’ I showed him the envelope. ‘Only, he didn’t sign his’ (I couldn’t even say ‘name’) ‘he didn’t sign it.’

‘Yah, aha.’ The non-vicar hasn’t been surprised by anything for years. ‘Come to the solarium. You may remove your shoes.’

Inside smelt of liver and soil. A velvet staircase sliced sunlight across the hall. A blue guitar rested on a sort of Turkish chair. A bare lady in a punt drifted on a lake of water lilies in a gold frame. The ‘solarium’ sounded ace. A planetarium for the sun instead of stars? Maybe the vicar was an astronomer in his spare time.

The old man offered me a shoehorn. I’m not sure how to use them, so I said, ‘No thanks,’ and prised my trainers off the usual way. ‘Are you a butler?’

‘Butler. Yah, aha. A good description of my role in this house, I think. Follow me, please.’

I thought only archbishops and popes were posh enough for butlers, but vicars can obviously have them too. The worn floorboards ribbled the soles of my feet through my socks. The hallway wound past a boring lounge and a clean kitchen. The high ceilings had cobwebby chandeliers.

I nearly bumped into the butler’s back.

He'd stopped, and spoke around a narrow door. 'A visitor.'

This solarium didn't have any scientific apparatus in it, though its skylights were big enough for telescopes. The huge window framed a wild garden of foxgloves and red-hot pokers. Bookcases lined the walls. Midget trees stood in mossy pots round the unused fireplace. Cigarette smoke hazed everything like in a TV flashback.

On a cane throne sat an old toady lady.

Old but grand, like she'd stepped out of a portrait, with silver hair and a royal purple shawl. I guessed she was the vicar's mother. Her jewels were big as Cola Cubes and Sherbert Lemons. Maybe she was sixty, maybe seventy. With old people and little kids you can't be sure. I turned to look at the butler but the butler'd gone.

The old lady's rivery eyeballs chased the words across the pages of her book.

Should I cough? That'd be stupid. She knew I was there.

Smoke streamed upwards from her cigarette.

I sat down on an armless sofa till she was ready to talk. Her book was called Le Grand Meaulnes. I wondered what Meaulnes meant and wished I was as good at French as Avril Bredon.

The clock on the mantelpiece shaved minutes into seconds.

Her knuckles were as ridged as Toblerone. Every now and then her bony fingers swept ash off the page.

‘My name is Eva van Outryve de Crommelynck.’ If a peacock had a human voice, that’d be hers. ‘You may address me as Madame Crommelynck.’ I guessed her accent was French without being sure. ‘My English friends, an endangered species in these days, they say to me, “Eva, in Great Britain your ‘Madame’ is too onions-and-beret. Why not simply ‘Mrs’ Crommelynck?” And I say, “Go to the hell! What is wrong with onions-and-berets? I am Madame and my “e” is strongly attached!” Allons donc. It is three o’clock, a little after, so you are Eliot Bolivar the poet, I presume?’

‘Yes.’ (‘Poet’!) ‘Very pleased to meet you...Madame Crommylenk?’

‘Crom-mel-ynck.’

‘Crommelynck.’

‘Bad, but better. You are younger than I estimated. Fourteen? Fifteen?’

It’s ace being mistaken for an older kid. ‘Thirteen.’

‘Ackkk, a wonderful, miserable age. Not a boy, not a teenager. Impatience but timidity too. Emotional incontinence.’

‘Is the vicar going to get here soon?’

‘Pardon me?’ She leant forwards. ‘Who’ (it came out as ‘oo’) ‘is this “vicar”?’

‘This is the vicarage, right?’ I showed her my invitation, uneasy now. ‘It says so on your gatepost. On the main road.’

‘Ah.’ Madame Crommelynck nodded. ‘Vicar, vicarage. You miscomprehend a thing. A vicar lived here once upon a time, doubtless – before him two vicars, three vicars, many vicars’ – her scrawny hand mimed a poof of smoke – ‘but no more. The Anglican Church becomes bankrupter and bankrupter, year by year, like British Leyland cars. My father said, Catholics know how to run the business of religion. Catholics

and Mormons. Propagate customers, they tell their congregation, or is the inferno for you! But your Church of England, no. Consequences is, these enchantible rectory houses are sold or rented, and vicars must move to little houses. Only the name “vicarage” is remaining.’

‘But,’ I swallowed, ‘I’ve been posting my poems through your letter box since January. How come they’re printed in the parish magazine every month?’

‘This,’ Madame Crommelynck took such a mighty drag on her cigarette I could see it shrink, ‘should be no mystery to an agile brain. I deliver your poems to the real vicar in his real vicarage. An ugly bungalow near Hanley Castle. I do not charge you for this service. Is gratis. Is a fine exercise for my not-agile bones. But in payment, I read your poems first.’

‘Oh. Does the real vicar know?’

‘I too make my deliveries in darkness, anonymous, so I am not apprehended by the vicar’s wife – oh, she is an hundred times worst than he is. An harpy of tattle-tittle. She asked to use my garden for her St Gabriel’s Summer Fête! “It is tradition,” says Mrs Vicar. “We need space for the human bridge. For the stalls.” I tell her, “Go to the hell! I pay you rent, do I not? Who has need of a divine creator who must sell inferior marmalade?”’ Madame Crommelynck smacked her leathery lips. ‘But at least, her husband publishes your poems in his funny magazine. Perhaps he is redeemable.’ She gestured at a bottle of wine stood on a pearly table. ‘You will drink a little?’

A whole glass, said Unborn Twin.

I could hear Dad saying, You drank what? ‘No thanks.’

Your loss, Madame Crommelynck shrugged.

Inky blood filled her glass.

Satisfied, she rapped on a small pile of Black Swan Green parish magazines by her side. ‘To business.’

‘A young man needs to learn when a woman wishes her cigarette to be lit.’

‘Sorry.’

An emerald dragon wraps Madame Crommelynck’s lighter. I was worried the smell of cigarette smoke’d stick to my clothes and I’d have to make up a story for Mum and Dad about where I’d been. While she smoked, she murmured my poem ‘Rocks’ from May’s magazine.

I felt giddy with importance that my words’d captured the attention of this exotic woman. Fear, too. If you show someone something you’ve written, you give them a sharpened stake, lie down in your coffin and say, ‘When you’re ready.’

Madame Crommelynck did a tiny growl. ‘You imagine blank verse is a liberation, but no. Discard rhyme, you discard a parachute...Sentimentality you mistake for emotion...You love words, yes’ (a pride-bubble swelled up in me) ‘but your words are still the master of you, you are not yet master of them...’ (The bubble popped.) She studied my reaction. ‘But, at least, your poem is robust enough to be criticized. Most so-called poems disintegrate at one touch. Your imagery is here, there, fresh, I am not ashamed to call it so. Now I wish to know a thing.’

‘Sure. Anything.’

‘The domesticity in this poem, these kitchens, gardens, ponds...is not a metaphor for the ludicrous war in the South Atlantic in this year?’

‘The Falklands was on while I was writing the poem,’ I answered. ‘The war just sort of seeped in.’

‘So these demons who do war in the garden, they symbolise General Galtieri and Margaret Thatcher. I am right?’

‘Sort of, yes.’

‘But they are also your father and your mother, however. I am right?’

Hesitations’re yeses or nos if the questioner already knows the answer. It’s one thing writing about your parents. Admitting it’s another matter.

Madame Crommelynck did a tobaccoey croon to show her delight. ‘You are a polite thirteen year boy who is too timid to cut his umbilical cords! Except,’ she gave the page a nasty poke, ‘here. Here in your poems you do what you do not dare to do,’ she jabbed at the window, ‘here. In reality. To express what is here.’ She jabbed my heart. It hurt.

X-rays make me queasy.

Once a poem’s left home it doesn’t care about you.

““Back Gardens”.’ Madame Crommelynck held up the June edition.

I was sure she thought the title was a killer.

‘But why is this title so atrocious?’

‘Uh...it wasn’t my first choice.’

‘So why you christen your creation with an inferior name?’

‘I was going to call it “Spooks”. But there’s this actual gang who’re called that. They go nightcreeping round the village. If I called the poem that they might suspect who’d written it and sort of...get me.’

Madame Crommelynck sniffed, under-impressed. Her mouth chanted my lines at quarter-volume. I hoped at least she’d say something about the poem’s descriptions of dusk and moonlight and darkness.

‘There are many beautiful words in here...’

‘Thanks,’ I agreed.

‘Beautiful words ruin your poetry. A touch of beauty enhances a dish, but you throw a hill of it into the pot! No, the palate becomes nauseous. You

belief a poem must be beautiful, or it can have no excellence. I am right?’

‘Sort of.’

“Your “sort of” is annoying. A yes, or a no, or a qualification, please. “Sort of” is an idle loubard, an ignorant vandale. “Sort of” says, “I am ashamed by clarity and precision.” So we try again. You belief a poem must be beautiful, or it is not a poem. I am right?”

‘Yes.’

‘Yes. Idiots labour in this misconception. Beauty is not excellence. Beauty is distraction, beauty is cosmetics, beauty is ultimately fatigue. Here —’ She read from the fifth verse. ““Venus swung bright from the ear of the moon”. The poem has a terminal deflation. Fffffft! Dead tyre. Automobile accident. It says, “Am I not a pretty pretty?” I answer, “Go to the hell!” If you have a magnolia in a courtyard, do you paint its flowers? Affix the flashy-flashy Christmas lights? Attach plastic parrots? No. You do not.’

What she said sounded true, but...

‘You think,’ Madame Crommelynck snorted smoke, ““This old witch is crazy! A magnolia tree exists already. Magnolias do not need poets to exist. In the case of a poem, a poem, I must create it.””

I nodded. (I would’ve thought that if I’d had a few minutes.)

‘You must say what you think, or else spend your Saturday with your head in a bucket and not in conversation with me. You understand?’

‘Okay,’ I said, nervous that ‘okay’ wasn’t okay.

‘Good. I reply, verse is “made”. But the word “make” is unsufficient for a true poem. “Create” is unsufficient. All words are unsufficient. Because of this. The poem exists before it is written.’

That, I didn’t get. ‘Where?’

‘T. S. Eliot expresses it so – the poem is a raid on the inarticulate. I, Eva van Outryve de Crommelynck, agree with him. Poems who are not written yet, or not written ever, exists here. The realm of the inarticulate. Art,’ she put another cigarette in her mouth and this time I was ready with her dragon lighter, ‘fabricated of the inarticulate is beauty. Even if its themes is ugly. Silver moons, thundering seas, clichés of cheese, poison beauty. The amateur thinks his words, his paints, his notes makes the beauty. But the master knows his words is just the vehicle in who beauty sits. The master knows he does not know what beauty is. Test this. Attempt a definition now. What is beauty?’

Madame Crommelynck tapped cigarette ash into a ruby blobby ashtray.

‘Beauty’s...’

She relished my stumpedness. I wanted to impress her with a clever definition, but I kept crashing into beauty’s something that’s beautiful.

Problem was, all this is new. In English at school we study a grammar book by a man named Ronald Ridout, read Cider with Rosie, do debates on fox-hunting and memorize ‘I Must Go Down to the Seas Again’ by John Masefield. We don’t have to actually think about stuff.

I admitted, ‘It’s difficult.’

‘Difficult?’ (Her ashtray was in the shape of a curled girl, I saw.) ‘Impossible! Beauty is immune to definition. When beauty is present, you know. Winter sunrise in dirty Toronto, one’s new lover in an old café, sinister magpies on a roof. But is the beauty of these made? No. Beauty is here, that is all. Beauty is.’

‘But...’ I hesitated, wondering if I should say this.

‘My one demand,’ she said, ‘is you say what you think!’

‘You just chose natural things. How about paintings, or music. We say, “The potter makes a beautiful vase.” Don’t we?’

‘We say, we say. Be careful of say. Words say, “You have labelled this abstract, this concept, therefore you have captured it.” No. They lie. Or not lie, but are maladroit. Clumsy. Your potter has made the vase, yes, but has not made the beauty. Only an object where it resides. Until the vase is dropped and breaks. Who is the ultimate fate of every vase.’

‘But,’ I still wasn’t satisfied, ‘surely some people, somewhere know what beauty is? At a university?’

‘University?’ She made a noise that might’ve been laughter. ‘Imponderables are ponderable, but answerable, no. Ask a philosopher, but be cautious. If you hear, “Eureka!”, if you think, “His answer has captured my question!”, then here is proof he is a counterfeit. If your philosopher has truly left Plato’s cave, if he has stared into that sun of the blind...’ She counted the three possibilities on her fingers. ‘He is lunatic, or his answers are questions who is only masquerading as answers, or he is silent. Silent because you can know or you can say, but both, no. My glass is empty.’

The last drops were the thickest.

‘Are you a poet?’ (I’d nearly said ‘too’.)

‘No. That title is hazardous. But, I had intimacy with poets when I was young. Robert Graves wrote a poem of me. Not his best. William Carlos Williams asked me to abandon my husband and,’ she uttered the word like a pantomime witch, ““elope”! Very romantic, but I had a pragmatic head and he was destitute as...épouvantail, a – how you say the man in a field who frights birds?’

‘Scarecrow?’

‘Scarecrow. Exactly. So I tell him, “Go to the hell, Willy, our souls eat poetry, but one has seven deadly sins to feed!” He consented my logic. Poets are listeners, if they are not intoxicated. But novelists,’ Madame Crommelynck did a yuck face, ‘is schizoids, lunatics, liars. Henry Miller stayed in our colony in Taormina. A pig, a perspiring pig, and Hemingway, you know?’

I’d heard of him so I nodded.

‘Lecherousest pig in the entire farm! Cinematographers? Fffffft. Petits Zeus of their universes. The world is their own film set. Charles Chaplin also, he was my neighbour in Geneva, across the lake. A charming petit Zeus, but a petit Zeus. Painters? Squeeze their hearts dry to make the pigments. No heart remains for people. Look at that Andalusian goat, Picasso. His biographers come for my stories of him, beg, offer money, but I tell them, “Go to the hell, I am not an human juke box. Composers? My father was one. Vyvyan Ayrs. His ears was burnt with his music. I, or my mother, he rarely listened. Formidable in his generation, but now he is fallen from the repertory. He exiled at Zedelghem, south of Bruges. My mother’s estate was there. My native tongue is Flemish. So you hear, English is not an adroit tongue for me, too many – lesses and – lessnesses. You think I am French?’

I nodded.

‘Belgian. The destiny of discreet neighbours is to be confused with the noisy ones next door. See an animal! On the lawn. By the geraniums...’

One moment we were watching the twitch of a squirrel's heart.

The next, it'd vanished.

Madame Crommelynck said, 'Look at me.'

'I am doing.'

'No. You are not. Sit here.'

I sat on her footstool. (I wondered if Madame Crommelynck's got a butler 'cause something's wrong with her legs.) 'Okay.'

'Do not hide in your "okay". Closer. I do not bite off the heads of boys. Not on a full stomach. Look.'

There's a rule that says you don't gaze too intently at a person's face. Madame Crommelynck was ordering me to break it.

'Look closer.'

Those parma violets, I smelt, fabrics, an ambery perfume, and something rotting. Then something weird happened. The old woman turned into an it. Sags ruckussed its eye-bags and eyelids. Its eyelashes'd been gummed into spikes. Deltas of tiny red veins snaked its stained whites. Its irises misty like long-buried marbles. Make-up dusted its mummified skin. Its gristly nose was subsiding into its skull-hole.

'You see beauty here?' it spoke in the wrong voice.

Manners told me to say yes.

'Liar!' It pulled back and became Madame Crommelynck again. 'Forty, thirty years ago, yes. My parents created me in the customary fashion. Like your potter making your vase. I grew to a girl. In mirrors, my beautiful lips told my beautiful eyes, "You are me." Men made stratagems and fights,

worshipped and deceived, burnt money on extravagances, to “win” this beauty. My age of gold.’

Hammering started up in a far-off room.

‘But human beauty falls leaf by leaf. You miss the beginning. One tells one, No, I am tired or The day is bad, that is all. But later, one cannot contradict the mirror. Day by day by day it falls, until this vieille sorcière is all who remains, who uses cosmetician’s potions to approximate her birth-gift. Oh, people say, “The old are still beautiful!” They patronize, they flatter, maybe they wish to comfort themselves. But no. Eating the roots of beauty is a—’ Madame Crommelynck sank back into her creaky throne, tired out. ‘An, how you say, the snail who has no house?’

‘A slug?’

‘Insatiable, undestructible slug. Where in the hell are my cigarettes?’

The box’d slipped to her feet. I passed them to her.

‘Leave now.’ She looked away. ‘Return next Saturday, three o’clock, I tell you more reasons why your poems fail. Or do not return. An hundred other works are waiting.’ Madame Crommelynck picked up Le Grand Meaulnes, found her place and started reading. Her breathing’d got whistlier and I wondered if she was ill.

‘Thanks, then...’

My legs’d got pins and needles.

As far as Madame Crommelynck was concerned, I’d already left the solarium.



Druggy pom-pom bees hovered in the lavender. The dusty Volvo was still in the drive, still needing its wash. I didn't tell Mum or Dad where I was going today, either. Telling them about Madame Crommelynck'd mean (a) admitting I was Eliot Bolivar, (b) twenty questions about who she is I can't answer 'cause she's an unnumbered dot-to-dot, (c) being told not to pester her. Kids aren't s'posed to visit old ladies if they're not grandmothers or aunts.

I pressed the bell.

The vicarage took ages to swallow up the chime.

Nobody. Had she gone out for a walk?

The butler hadn't taken this long last week.

I banged the knocker, sure it was useless.

I'd pedalled like mad over here 'cause I was thirty minutes late. Madame Crommelynck'd have a field marshal's attitude to punctuality, I reckoned. All for nothing, it appeared. I'd got *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway from the school library, just 'cause Madame Crommelynck'd mentioned him. (The introduction said the book'd made Americans burst into tears when it was read on the radio. But it's just about an old guy catching a monster sardine. If Americans cry at that they'll cry at anything.) I rubbed some lavender in my palms and snuffed. Lavender's my favourite smell, after Tipp-Ex and bacon rind. I sat down on the steps, not sure where to go next.

A July afternoon yawned.

Mirage-puddles'd shimmered on the Welland road as I rode here.

I could've gone to sleep on the baked doorstep.

Little naked ants.

A bolt slid like a rifle and the old butler opened up. ‘You are back for more.’ Today he wore a golf jersey. ‘You may remove your shoes.’

‘Thanks.’ As I prised off my trainers I heard a piano, joined by a quiet violin. I hoped Madame Crommelynck didn’t have a visitor. Once you have three people you may as well have a hundred. The stairway needed fixing. A knackered blue guitar’d been left on a broken stool. In the gaudy frame a shivery woman sprawled in a punt on a clogged pond. Once again, the butler led me to the solarium. (I looked ‘solarium’ up. It just means ‘an airy room’.) The sequence of doors we passed made me think of all the rooms of my past and future. The hospital ward I was born in, classrooms, tents, churches, offices, hotels, museums, nursing homes, the room I’ll die in. (Has it been built yet?) Cars’re rooms. So are woods. Skies’re ceilings. Distances’re walls. Wombs’re rooms made of mothers. Graves’re rooms made of soil.

That music was swelling.

A Jules Verne hi-fi, all silvery knobs and dials, occupied one corner of the solarium. Madame Crommelynck sat on her cane throne, eyes shut, listening. As if the music was a warm bath. (This time I knew she wouldn't be speaking for a while, so I just sat down on the armless sofa.) A classical LP was playing. Nothing like the rumpty-tumpty-stuff Mr Kempsey plays in Music. Jealous and sweet, this music was, sobbing and gorgeous, muddy and crystal. But if the right words existed the music wouldn't need to.

The piano'd vanished. Now a flute'd joined the violin.

An unfinished letter going on for pages lay on Eva Crommelynck's desk. She must have put on this LP when she couldn't think of its next sentence. A fat silver pen rested on the page she'd stopped writing. I batted off an urge to pick it up and read it.

The stylus-arm clunked in its cradle. ‘The inconsolable,’ Madame Crommelynck said, ‘is so consoling.’ She didn’t look very pleased to see me. ‘What is that advertisement you are wearing on your chest?’

‘What advertisement?’

‘That advertisement on your sweater!’

‘This is my Liverpool FC top. I’ve supported them since I was five.’

‘What signifies “HITACHI”?’

‘The FA’ve changed the rules so football teams can wear sponsors’ logos. Hitachi’s an electronics firm. From Hong Kong, I think.’

‘So you pay an organization to be their advertisement? Allons donc. In clothes, in cuisine, the English have an irresistible urge to self-mutilation. But today you are late.’

Explaining the ins and outs of the Mr Blake Affair would’ve taken too long. I’ve lost count of how many times Mum and Dad and even Julia (when she’s feeling vicious)’ve said We’ll say no more about it, then dredge it up five minutes later. So I just told Madame Crommelynck I’ve got to do the washing-up on my own for a month to pay for something I’d broken, and it’d been a late lunch ’cause Mum’d forgotten to defrost the leg of lamb.

Madame Crommelynck got bored before I finished. She gestured at the bottle of wine on her pearly table. ‘Today you drink?’

‘I’m only allowed a thimbleful, on special occasions.’

‘If an audience with me does not qualify as “special”, pour my glass.’

(White wine smells of Granny Smiths, icy meths and tiny flowers.)

‘Always pour so the label is visible! If the wine is good, your drinker should know so. If the wine is bad, you deserve shame.’

I obeyed. A drop dribbled down the bottle’s neck.

‘So. Do I learn today your true name, or do I still give hospitality to a stranger who hides behind a ridiculous pseudonym?’

Hangman was even stopping me saying ‘Sorry’. I got so het up and desperate and angry I blurted out ‘Sorry!’ anyway, but so loud it sounded really rude.

‘Your elegant apology does not answer my question.’

I mumbled, ‘Jason Taylor,’ and wanted to cry.

‘Jay who? Pronounce it clearly! My ears are as old as me! I do not have microphones hidden to collect every little word!’

I hated my name. ‘Jason Taylor.’ Flavourless as chewed receipts.

‘If you are an “Adolf Coffin”, or a “Pius Broomhead”, I comprehend. But why hide “Jason Taylor” under an inaccessible symbolist and a Latin American revolutionary?’

My huh? must’ve shown.

‘Eliot! T. S.! Bolívar! Simón!’

““Eliot Bolivar” just sounded more...poetic.”

‘What is more poetic than ‘Jason’, an Hellenic hero? Who founded European literature if not the Ancient Greeks? Not Eliot’s coterie of thieves of graves, I assure you! And what is a poet if he is not a tailor of words? Poets and tailors join what nobody else can join. Poets and tailors conceal their craft in their craft. No, I do not accept your answer. I believe the truth is, you use your pseudonym because your poetry is a shameful secret. I am correct?’

““Shameful” isn’t the exact word, exactly.”

‘Oh, so what is the exact word, exactly?’

‘Writing poetry’s,’ I looked around the solarium, but Madame Crommelynck’s got a tractor beam, ‘sort of...gay.’

“Gay”? A merry activity?”

This was hopeless. ‘Writing poems is...what creeps and poofers do.’

‘So you are one of these “creeps”?’

‘No.’

‘Then you are a “pooof-ter”, whatever one is?’

‘No!’

‘Then your logic is eluding me.’

‘If your dad’s a famous composer, and your mum’s an aristocrat, you can do things that you can’t do if your dad works at Greenland Supermarkets and if you go to a comprehensive school. Poetry’s one of those things.’

‘Aha! Truth! You are afraid the hairy barbarians will not accept you in their tribe if you write poetry.’

‘That’s more or less it, yeah...’

‘More? Or less? Which is the exact word, exactly?’

(She’s a pain sometimes.) ‘That’s it. Exactly.’

‘And you wish to become an hairy barbarian?’

‘I’m a kid. I’m thirteen. You said it’s a miserable age, being thirteen, and you’re right. If you don’t fit in, they make your life a misery. Like Floyd Chaceley or Nicholas Briar.’

‘Now you are talking like a real poet.’

‘I don’t understand it when you say stuff like that!’

(Mum'd've gone, Don't talk to me in that tone of voice!)

'I mean,' Madame Crommelynck almost looked pleased, 'you are entirely of your words.'

'What does that mean?'

'You are being quintessentially truthful.'

'Anyone can be truthful.'

'About superficialities, Jason, yes, is easy. About pain, no, is not. So you want a double life. One Jason Taylor who seeks approval of hairy barbarians. Another Jason Taylor is Eliot Bolivar who seeks approval of the literary world.'

'Is that so impossible?'

'If you wish to be a versifier,' she whirlpooled her wine, 'very possible. If you are a true artist,' she schwurked wine round her mouth, 'absolutely never. If you are not truthful to the world about who and what you are, your art will stink of falsenesses.'

I had no answer for that.

'Nobody knows of your poems? A teacher? A confidant?'

'Only you, actually.'

Madame Crommelynck's eyes've got this glint. It's nothing to do with outside light. 'You hide your poetry from your lover?'

'No,' I said. 'I, uh, don't.'

'Don't hide your poetry or don't have a lover?'

'I don't have a girlfriend.'

Quick as a chess-clock thumper, she said, 'You prefer boys?'

I still can't believe she said that. (Yes I can.) 'I'm normal!'

Her drumming fingers on the pile of parish magazines said, Normal?

'I do like this one girl, actually,' I blurted out, to prove it. 'Dawn Madden. But she's already got a boyfriend.'

'Oho? And the boyfriend of Dawn Madden, he is a poet or a barbarian?' (She loved how she'd tricked Dawn Madden's name out of me.)

'Ross Wilcox's a prat, not a poet. But if you're going to suggest that I write a poem to Dawn Madden, no way. I'd be the village laughing-stock.'

'Absolutely, if you compose derivative verses of Cupids and cliché, Miss Madden will remain with her "prat" and you justly earn derision. But if a poem is beauty and truth, your Miss Madden will treasure your words more than money, more than certificates. Even when she is as old as I. Especially when she is as old as I.'

'But,' I ducked the subject, 'don't heaps of artists use pseudonyms?'

'Who?'

'Um...' Only Cliff Richard and Sid Vicious came to mind.

A phone started ringing.

'True poetry is truth. Truth is not popular, so poetry also is not.'

'But...truth about what?'

'Oh, the life, the death, the heart, memory, time, cats, fear. Anything.' (The butler didn't seem to be answering the phone either.) 'Truth is everywhere, like seeds of trees, even deceits contain elements of truth. But the eye is clouded by the quotidian, by prejudice, by worryings, scandal, predation, passion, ennui, and worst, television. Despicable machine. Television was here in my solarium. When I arrived. I throwed it in the cellar. It was watching me. A poet throws all but truth in the cellar. Jason. There is a matter?'

‘Er...your phone’s ringing.’

‘I know a phone is ringing! It can go to the hell! I am talking to you!’
(My parents’d run into a burning asbestos mine if they thought there was a phone in there ringing for them.) ‘One week before, we agreed “What is beauty?” is a question unanswerable, yes? So today, a greater mystery. If an art is true, if an art is free of falsenesses, it is, a priori, beautiful.’

I tried to digest that.

(The phone finally gave up.)

‘Your best poem in here,’ she rifled through the parish magazines, ‘is your “Hangman”. It has pieces of truth of your speech impediment, I am right?’

A familiar shame burnt from my neck, but I nodded.

Only in my poems, I realized, do I get to say exactly what I want.

‘Of course I am right. If “Jason Taylor” was the name here, and not “Eliot Bolivar, PhD, OBE, RIP, BBC”’ – she biffed the page with ‘Hangman’ on it – ‘the truth will make the greatest mortification with the hairy barbarians of Black Swan Green, yes?’

‘I might as well hang myself.’

‘Pfff! Eliot Bolivar, he can hang. You, you must write. If you still fear to publish in your name, is better not to publish. But poetry is more resilient than you think. For many years I assisted for Amnesty International.’ (Julia’s often on about them.) ‘Poets survive in gulags, in detention blocks, in torture chambers. Even in that misery hole there is poets working, Merdegate, no, where in the hell, on the Channel, I always am forgetting...’ (She rapped her forehead to knock loose the name.) ‘Margate. So believe me. Comprehensive schools are not so infernal.’

‘That music, when I came in. Was that your dad’s? It was beautiful. I didn’t know there was music like that.’

‘The sextet of Robert Frobisher. He was an amanuensis for my father, when my father was too old, too blind, too weak to hold a pen.’

‘I looked up Vyvyan Ayrs in the Encyclopaedia Britannica at school.’

‘Oh? And how does this authority venerate my father?’

The entry’d been short enough to memorize. “British composer, born 1870 Yorkshire; died 1932 Neerbeke, Belgium. Noted works: Matruschyka Doll Variations, Untergehen Violinkonzert and Tottenvogel—”

‘—Die TODtenvogel! TODtenvogel!’

‘Sorry. “Critically respected in Europe during his lifetime, Ayrs is now rarely referred to outside the footnotes of twentieth-century music.”’

‘That is all?’

I’d expected her to be impressed.

‘A majestic encomium.’ She said it flat as a glass of Coke left out.

‘But it must’ve been ace having a composer for a father.’

I held the dragon lighter steady as she lowered the tip of her cigarette into the flame. ‘He made great unhappinesses for my mother.’ She inhaled, then blew out a quivery sapling of smoke. ‘Even today, to forgive is difficult. At your age, I went to school in Bruges and saw my father at weekends only. He had his illness, his music, and we did not communicate. After his funeral, I wished to ask him one thousand things. Too late. Old story. Next to your head is a photographic album. Yes, that one. Pass it.’

A girl Julia's age sat on a pony under a big tree, before colour was invented. A strand of hair curled against her cheek. Her thighs clamped the pony's flank.

'God,' I thought aloud, 'she's gorgeous.'

'Yes. Whatever beauty is, I had it, in those days. Or it had me.'

'You?' Startled, I compared Madame Crommelynck with the girl in the photo. 'Sorry.'

'Your habit with that word diminishes your stature. Nefertiti was my finest pony. I entrusted her to the Dhondts – the Dhondts were family friends – when Grigoire and I escaped to Sweden seven, eight years after this photograph. The Dhondts were killed in 1942, during occupation by the Nazis. You imagine they are Resistance heroes? No, it was Morty Dhondt's sports car. His brakes failed, boom. Nefertiti's destiny, I do not know. Glue, sausages, stews for black market men, for gypsies, for SS officers, if I am realistic. This photograph was taken in Neerbeke in 1929, 1930...behind that tree is Zedelghem Chateau. My ancestor's home.'

'Do you still own it?'

'It no longer exists. The Germans built an airfield where you see, so the British, the Americans...' Her hand made a boom gesture. 'Stones, craters, mud. Now is all little boxes for houses, a gasoline station, a supermarket. Our home who survived half a millennium exists now only in a few old heads. And a few old photographs. My wise friend Susan has written this. "By slicing out this moment and freezing it..."' Madame Crommelynck studied the girl she'd once been and tapped ash from her cigarette. "...all photographs testify to time's relentless melt."

A bored dog barked a garden or two away.

A bride and groom pose outside a flinty chapel. Bare twigs say it's winter. The groom's thin lips say, Look what I've got. A top hat, a cane, half fox. But the bride's half lioness. Her smile's the idea of a smile. She knows more about her new husband than he knows about her. Above the church door a stone lady gazes up at her stone knight. Flesh-and-blood people in photographs look at the camera, but stone people look through the camera straight at you.

'My producers,' announced Madame Crommelynck.

'Your parents? Were they nice?' That sounded stupid.

'My father died of syphilis. Your encyclopaedia did not say that. Not a "nice" death, I recommend you avoid. You see, the era' ('era' was a long sigh) 'was different. Feelings were not expressed so incontinently. Not in our class of society, anyhow. My mother, oh, she was capable of great affection, but tempestuous anger! She exerted power over all who she chose. No, I think not "nice". She died of an aneurysm just two years later.'

I said, 'I'm sorry,' like you're s'posed to, for the first time in my life.

'It was a mercy she did not witness the destruction of Zedelghem.' Madame Crommelynck raised her glasses to peer closer at the wedding photo. 'How young! Photographs make me forget if time is forwards or backwards. No, photographs make me wonder if there is a forwards or backwards. My glass is empty, Jason.'

I poured her wine, with the label showing properly.

'I never comprehended their marriage. Its alchemy. Do you?'

'Me? Do I understand my parents' marriage?'

'That is my question.'

I thought hard. ‘I’ve’ (Hangman gripped ‘never’ and wouldn’t let it go) ‘I haven’t thought about it before. I mean...my parents’re just there. They argue quite a lot, I s’pose, but they do a lot of their talking when they’re arguing. They can be nice to each other. If it’s Mum’s birthday and Dad’s away he gets Interflora to bring flowers. But Dad’s working most weekends ’cause of the recession, and Mum’s opening this gallery in Cheltenham. There’s like this cold war over that at the moment.’ (Talking with some people’s like moving up higher screens of a computer game.) ‘If I’d been more like an ideal son like on Little House on the Prairie, if I’d been less sulky, then maybe Mum and Dad’s marriage might’ve been’ (the true word was ‘sunnier’ but Hangman was active today) ‘friendlier. Julia, my’ (Hangman teased me over the next word) ‘sister, she’s ace at poking fun at Dad. Which he loves. And she can cheer Mum up just by rabbiting on. But she’s off to university in the autumn. Then it’ll just be the three of us. I can never get the right words out, not like Julia.’ Stammerers’re usually too stressed to feel sorry for themselves, but a few drops of self-pity fell on me. ‘I can never get any words out.’

Far off, the butler switched on his Hoover.

‘Ackkk,’ Madame Crommelynck said, ‘I am an inquisitive old witch.’

‘No you’re not.’

The old Belgian lady gave me a pointy glare over her glasses.

‘Not all the time.’

A young pianist sat on his piano stool, relaxed, smiling, smoking. His hair was quiffed waxy like old-fashioned film stars, but he didn't look toffish. He looked like Gary Drake. Nails in his eyes, wolf in his grin.

'Meet Robert Frobisher.'

'He's the one,' I checked, 'who wrote that incredible music?'

'Yes, he is the one who wrote that incredible music. Robert revered my father. Like a disciple, a son. They shared a musical empathy, who is an empathy more intimate than the sexual.' (She said 'sexual' like it was any other word.) 'It is thanks to Robert my father could compose his final masterpiece, *Die todtenvogel*. In Warsaw, in Paris, in Vienna, for a brief summer, the name of Vyvyan Ayrs was restored to glory. Oh, I was a jealous demoiselle!'

'Jealous? Why?'

'My father praised Robert without respite! So my behaviour was disgraceful. But such reverences, such empathies that existed between them, they are very combustible. Friendship is a calmer thing. Robert left Zedelghem in winter.'

'Back to England?'

'Robert had no home. His parents had uninherited him. He accommodated in an hotel, in Bruges. My mother forbidded me to meet him. Fifty years ago, reputations were important passports. Ladies of pedigree had a chaperone every minute. Anyhow, I did not wish to meet. Grigoire and I were engaged and Robert was sickness in his head. Genius, sickness, flash-flash, storm, calm, like a lighthouse. An isolated lighthouse. He could have eclipsed Benjamin Britten, Olivier Messiaen, all of them. But after he completed his Sextet he blew his brains out in his hotel bathroom.'

The young pianist was still smiling.

‘Why did he do it?’

‘Has suicide only one cause? His family’s rejection? Despondency? Too much he read my father’s Nietzsche? Robert was obsessed of recurrence eternal. Recurrence is the heart of his music. We live exactly the same life, Robert believed, and die exactly the same death again, again, again, to the same demi-semi-quaver. To eternity. Or else,’ Madame Crommelynck relit her gone-out cigarette, ‘we can blame the girl.’

‘What girl?’

‘Robert loved a silly girl. She did not love him in return.’

‘So he killed himself just because she wouldn’t love him?’

‘A factor, perhaps. How big, how small, only Robert can tell us.’

‘But killing himself. Just over a girl.’

‘He was not the first one. He will not be the last one.’

‘God. Did the girl, y’know, know about it?’

‘Of course! Bruges is a city who is a village. She knew. And I assure you, fifty years later, the conscience of that girl still hurts. Like rheumatism. She would pay any price for Robert not to die. But what can she do?’

‘You’ve kept in touch with her?’

‘It is difficult for us to avoid, yes.’ Madame Crommelynck kept her eyes on Robert Frobisher. ‘This girl wants my forgiveness, before she dies. She begs me, “I was eighteen! Robert’s devotions were just a...a...flattery game for me! How could I know a famished heart will eat its mind? Can kill its body?” Oh, I pity her. I want to forgive her. But here is the truth.’ (Now she looked at me.) ‘I abhor that girl! I abhorred her all my life and I do not know how to stop to abhor her.’

When Julia’s really got on my wick, I vow I’ll never talk to her again. But by teatime, often as not, I’ve forgotten it. ‘Fifty years’s a long time to stay

angry with someone.'

Madame Crommelynck nodded, glum. 'I do not recommend it.'

'Have you tried pretending to forgive her?'

"Pretending", she looked at the garden, 'is not the truth.'

'But you said two true things, right? One, you hate this girl. Two, you want her to feel better. If you decided that the wanting truth's more important than the hating truth, just tell her you've forgiven her, even if you haven't. At least she'd feel better. Maybe that'd make you feel better too.'

Madame Crommelynck studied her hands, moodily, both sides. 'Sophistry,' she pronounced.

I'm not sure what 'sophistry' means so I kept shtum.

Far away the butler switched off the Hoover.

'Robert's Sextet is now impossible to buy. You encounter his music only by serendipity in vicarages in July afternoons. This is your one chance in your life. You can work this gramophone?'

'Sure.'

'Let us listen to the other side, Jason.'

'Great.' I turned the record over. Old LPs're as thick as plates.

A clarinet woke up and danced around the cello from Side A.

Madame Crommelynck lit a new cigarette and shut her eyes.

I lay back on the armless sofa. I've never listened to music lying down. Listening's reading if you close your eyes.

Music's a wood you walk through.

A thrush warbled on a starry bush. The turntable gave a dying ahhh and the stylus-arm clunked home. Madame Crommelynck's hand told me to stay where I was when I got up to light her cigarette. 'Tell me. Who are your teachers?'

'We've got different teachers for different subjects.'

'I mean, what are the writers you revere most greatly?'

'Oh.' I mentally scanned my bookshelf for the really impressive names. 'Isaac Asimov. Ursula Le Guin. John Wyndham.'

'Assy-Smurf? Ursular Gun? Wind-'em? These are modern poets?'

'No. Sci-fi, fantasy. Stephen King, too. He's horror.'

"Fantasy"? Pfft! Listen to Ronald Reagan's homilies! "Horror?" What of Vietnam, Afghanistan, South Africa? Idi Amin, Mao Tse-tung, Pol Pot? Is not enough horror? I mean, who are your masters? Chekhov?"

'Er...no.'

'But you have read Madame Bovary?'

(I'd never heard of her books.) 'No.'

'Not even,' she looked ratty now, 'Hermann Hesse?'

'No.' Unwisely I tried to dampen Madame Crommelynck's disgust. 'We don't really do Europeans at school...'

"Europeans"? England is now drifted to the Caribbean? Are you African? Antarctic? You are European, you illiterate monkey of puberty! Thomas Mann, Rilke, Gogol! Proust, Bulgakov, Victor Hugo! This is your culture, your inheritance, your skeleton! You are ignorant even of Kafka?"

I flinched. 'I've heard of him.'

‘This?’ She held up *Le Grand Meaulnes*.

‘No, but you were reading it last week.’

‘Is one of my bibles. I read it every year. So!’ She frisbeed the hardback book at me, hard. It hurt. ‘Alain-Fournier is your first true master. He is nostalgic and tragic and enchantible and he aches and you will ache too and, best of everything, he is true.’

As I opened it up a cloud of foreign words blew out. Il arriva chez nous un dimanche de novembre 189... ‘It’s in French.’

‘Translations are incourteous between Europeans.’ She detected the guilt in my silence. ‘Oho? English schoolboys in our enlightened 1980s cannot read a book in a foreign language?’

‘We do do French at school...’ (Madame Crommelynck made me go on.) ‘...but we’ve only got up to Youpla boum! Book 2.’

‘Pooooooooooft! When I was thirteen I spoke French and Dutch fluently! I could converse in German, in English, in Italian! Ackkk, for your schoolmasters, for your minister of education, execution is too good! Is not even arrogance! It is a baby who is too primitive to know its nappy is stinking and bursting! You English, you deserve the government of Monster Thatcher! I curse you with twenty years of Thatchers! Maybe then you comprehend, speaking one language only is prison! You have a French dictionary and a grammar, anyhow?’

I nodded. Julia does.

‘So. Translate the first chapter of Alain-Fournier from French to English, or do not return next Saturday. The author needs no parochial schoolchildren to disfigure his truth, but I need you to proof you do not waste my time. Go.’

Madame Crommelynck turned to her desk and picked up her pen.

Once again, I saw myself out of the vicarage. I stuffed Le Grand Meaulnes under my Liverpool FC top. Getting chucked out of Spooks has already sent me to unpopularity prison. Getting caught with a French novel would send me to the electric chair.



It thundered during RE the day school broke up for the summer. By the time we got to Black Swan Green it was pissing it down. Getting off the bus, Ross Wilcox shoved me between my shoulder blades. I arse-flopped into this ankle-deep puddle where the gutter'd flooded. Ross Wilcox and Gary Drake and Wayne Nashend shat themselves laughing. Goosey-goosey girls

turned and tittered under their brollies. (Mysterious how girls can always conjure up umbrellas.) Andrea Bozard saw, so of course she nudged Dawn Madden and pointed. Dawn Madden shrieked with laughter like girls do. (Bitch, I didn't quite dare say. The rain'd gummed a loop of her beautiful hair to her smooth forehead. I'd've died if I could've taken that loop of hair in my mouth and sucked the rain out.) Even Norman Bates the driver barked one bark of amusement. But I was soaked and humiliated and furious. I wanted to tear random bones out of Ross Wilcox's mutilated body, but Maggot reminded me he's the hardest kid in the second year and he'd probably just twist both hands off my wrists and lob them over the Black Swan. 'Oh, really blinking funny, Wilcox.' (Maggot stopped me saying fucking funny in case Wilcox demanded a scrap.) 'That's pathetic—' But on 'pathetic' my voice squeaked like my balls hadn't dropped. Everyone heard. A fresh bomb of laughter blew me into tiny bits.

I knocked a rhythm on the vicarage knocker and finished off with the doorbell. Worm casts pitted the bubbling lawn like squeezed blackheads and slugs were climbing up walls. The porch roof was dripping. My parka hood was dripping. Mum's gone to Cheltenham today to speak with builders, so I'd told Dad I'd probably ('probably's a word with an emergency ejector seat.) go and play electronic Battleships at Alastair Nurton's. Dean Moran's considered a bad influence since the Mr Blake affair. I'd come on my bike 'cause if anyone'd been out I could've just said 'All right?' and cycled on. If you're caught on foot you might face an interrogation. But today everyone was watching Jimmy Connors versus John McEnroe on TV. (It's wet here but it's sunny in Wimbledon.) Le Grand Meaulnes was wrapped inside two Marks Spencer placky bags stuffed inside my shirt, with my translation. I spent hours on it. Every other word I'd had to look up in the dictionary. Even Julia noticed. She said yesterday, 'Things slacken off towards the end of term, I thought.' I answered that I wanted to get my summer homework over and done with. The weird thing is, doing the translation didn't feel like hours, not once I got going. Bags more interesting than Youpla boum! Le françois pour tous (French Method) Book 2 about Manuel, Claudette, Marie-France, Monsieur et Madame Berri. I'd've liked to've asked Miss Wyche our French teacher to check my translation. But getting creep-stained as a model student in a subject as girly as French'd sink what's left of my middle-ranking status.

Translating's half-poem and half-crossword and no doddle. Loads of words aren't actual words you can look up, but screws of grammar that hold the sentence together. It takes yonks to find out what they mean, though once you know them you know them. Le Grand Meaulnes is about this kid Augustin Meaulnes. Augustin Meaulnes's got an aura, like Nick Yew, that just has an effect on people. He comes to live with a schoolmaster's son called François as a boarder. François tells the story. We hear Meaulnes's footsteps, in the room above, before we even see him. It's brilliant. I'd decided to ask Madame Crommelynck to teach me French. Proper French, not French at school. I'd even started daydreaming about going to France, after my O-levels or A-levels. French kissing's where you touch with your tongues.

The butler was taking for ever. Even longer than last week.

Impatient for my new future to come, I pressed the doorbell again.

Immediately, a pinky man in black opened up. ‘Hello.’

‘Hello.’

The rain turned up a notch or two.

‘Hello.’

‘Are you the new butler?’

‘Butler?’ The pinky man laughed. ‘Gracious, no! That’s a first! I’m Francis Bendincks. Vicar of St Gabriel’s.’ Only now did I see his dog-collar. ‘And you are?’

‘Oh. I’ve come to see Madame Crommelynck...’

‘Francis!’ Footsteps crong crong cronged down the wooden stairs. (Outdoor shoes, not slippers.) A woman’s voice snipped at high speed. ‘If that’s the television licence people, tell them I’ve looked high and low but I think they must’ve carted the thing off—’ She saw me.

‘This young chap’s come to visit Eva, apparently.’

‘Well, this young chap had better step inside, hadn’t he? Till the rain lets up, at least.’

Today the hallway had a behind-a-waterfall gloominess. The guitar’s blue paint’d flaked off like a skin disease. In her yellow frame a dying woman in a boat trailed her fingers in the water.

‘Thanks,’ I managed to say. ‘Madame Crommelynck’s expecting me.’

‘Why that would be, I wonder?’ The vicar’s wife poked her questions rather than asked them. ‘Oh! Are you Marjorie Bishampton’s youngest, here for the sponsored spelling bee?’

‘No,’ I said, unwilling to tell her my name.

‘So?’ Her smile looked grafted on. ‘You are?’

‘Er, Jason.’

‘Jason...?’

‘Taylor.’

‘That rings a bell...Kingfisher Meadows! Helena Taylor’s youngest. Poor Mrs Castle’s neighbours. Father a big cheese at Greenland Supermarkets, right? Sister off to Edinburgh this autumn. I met your mother at the art exhibition last year, in the village hall. She was taken with an oil painting of Eastnor Castle, though I’m sorry to say she never came back. Half the profits went to Christian Aid.’

She wasn’t getting a ‘Sorry’ from me.

‘Well, Jason,’ said the vicar. ‘Mrs Crommelynck has been called away. Rather unexpectedly.’

Oh. ‘Will she be back any time—’ (The wife brought on my stammer like an allergy. I was stuck on ‘soon’.)

““Soon?”” The wife gave me a can’t pull the wool over my eyes smile that mortified me. ‘Hardly! They’re gone as in Gone! It happened—’

‘Gwendolin.’ The vicar raised his hand like a shy kid in class. (I recognized the name ‘Gwendolin Bendincks’ from the parish magazine. She writes half of it.) ‘I’m not sure if it’s appropriate to be—’

‘Nonsense! It’ll be all round the village by teatime. Truth will out. We have some perfectly dreadful news, Jason.’ Gwendolin Bendincks eyes’d lit up like fairy lights. ‘The Crommelyncks have been extradited!’

I wasn’t too sure what that meant. ‘Under arrest?’

‘I’ll jolly well say so! Goose-stepped back to Bonn by the West German police! Their lawyer contacted us this morning. He refused to tell me why they’d been extradited, but, putting two and two together – the husband

retired from the Bundesbank six months ago – it's some sort of financial scam. Embezzlement. Bribery. Lots of that goes on in Germany.'

'Gwendolin,' the vicar had a wheezy smile, 'perhaps it's premature to—'

'Mind you, she once mentioned a few years spent in Berlin. Suppose she was spying for the Warsaw Pact? I told you, Francis, I always felt they kept themselves to themselves more than was natural.'

'But perhaps they're—' (Hangman choked the 'not' of 'not guilty').

"“Not guilty”?" Gwendolin Bendincks's lips twitched. 'The Home Secretary wouldn't let Interpol whisk them away if he wasn't jolly well sure of his facts, would he? But it's an ill wind, I always say. Now we can use the lawn for our fête, after all.'

'What,' I asked, 'about their butler?'

For two whole seconds Gwendolin Bendincks was stopped in her tracks.
'Butler? Francis! What's this about a butler?'

'Grigoire and Eva,' said the vicar, 'didn't have a butler. I assure you.'

I saw it. What a dildo I am.

The butler was the husband.

'I made a mistake,' I said, sheepishly. 'I'd better go now.'

'Not yet!' Gwendolin Bendincks hadn't finished. 'You'll get soaked to your skin! So tell us, what was your connection with Eva Crommelynck?'

'She was sort of teaching me.'

'Is that a fact? And what might she have been teaching you about?'

'Er...' I couldn't admit to poetry. 'French.'

'How cosy! I remember my first summer in France. Nineteen, I would have been. Or twenty. My aunt took me to Avignon, you know, where there's the song about dancing on the bridges. The English mademoiselle caused quite a stir among the local bees...'

The Crommelyncks will be in German police cells, right now. A stammering thirteen-year-old kid in deathliest England'll be the last thing on Mrs Crommelynck's mind. The solarium's gone. My poems are crap. How could they not be? I'm thirteen. What do I know about Beauty and Truth? Better bury Eliot Bolivar than let him carry on churning out shite. Me? Learn French? What was I thinking? God, Gwendolin Bendincks talks like fifty TVs all on at once. The mass and density of her words are bending space and time. A brick of loneliness is reaching terminal velocity inside me. I'd like a can of Tizer and a Toblerone, but Mr Rhydd's shop's shut on Saturday afternoons.

Black Swan Green's shut on Saturday afternoons.

All pissing England's shut.

Souvenirs

‘So while I’m slaving away,’ Dad pulled a face to shave round his lips, ‘in a sweaty conference room, covering in-store promotions with this year’s crop of’ – Dad jutted out his chin to shave a tricky bit – ‘Einstiens, you get to swan round Lyme Regis in the sun. All right for some, eh?’ He unplugged his shaver.

‘Guess so.’

Our room looked over roofs down to where this funny quay crooks into the sea. Gulls dived and screamed like Spitfires and Messerschmitts. Over the English Channel the sticky afternoon was as turquoise as Head and Shoulders shampoo.

‘Ah, you’ll have a whale of a time!’ Dad hummed a bendy version of ‘I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside’. (The bathroom door’d opened by itself, so I could see Dad’s chest reflected in the mirror as he put on a string vest and the shirt he’d just ironed. Dad’s chest’s as hairy as a cress experiment.) ‘Wish I could be thirteen again.’

Then, I thought, you’ve obviously forgotten what it’s like.

Dad opened up his wallet and took out three pound notes. He hesitated and took out two more. He leant through the doorway and put them on the chest of drawers. ‘A little spending money.’

Five quid! ‘Thanks, Dad!’

‘Don’t spend it on fruit machines, though.’

“Course not,” I answered before the ban spread to arcade games. ‘They’re a total waste of money.’

‘Glad to hear you say so. Gambling’s for mugs. Right, it’s now’ – Dad looked at his Rolex – ‘twenty to two?’

I checked my Casio. ‘Yes.’

‘You never wear your granddad’s Omega, I’ve noticed.’

‘I, er,’ my secret bit my conscience for the millionth time, ‘don’t want to accidentally damage it.’

‘Quite right. But if you never wear it, Granddad might as well’ve donated it to the Oxfam shop. Anyway, my session winds up at five, so I’ll meet you back here then. We’ll have dinner somewhere nice, and then, if the girl in Reception isn’t mistaken, Chariots of Fire is showing at the local flea-pit. Perhaps you can track the cinema down this afternoon? Lyme’s smaller than Malvern. If you get lost, just ask for the Hotel Excalibur. As in King Arthur. Jason? Are you listening to me?’

Lyme Regis was a casserole of tourists. Everywhere smelt of suntan oil, hamburgers and burnt sugar. My jean pockets corked with a crusty hanky to foil the pickpockets, I waded along the high street. I looked at the posters in Boots and bought the summer edition of 2000 AD in WH Smith for 40p. I rolled it up and stuck it in my back pocket. I sucked Mint Imperials in case I met a suntanned girl who'd take me upstairs to one of those saggy houses with seagulls screaming on the ridges, and draw her curtains and lie me on her bed and teach me how to kiss. Mint Imperials're hard as pebbles at first but they disintegrate into sugary mush. I looked in jewellers for an Omega Seamaster but as usual there weren't any. A man in the last one told me I should be looking in antique shops. I spent ages in a stationery shop in a trance conjured up by all the perfect pads. I bought a packet of Letraset and a TDK C-60 cassette to tape the best songs in the Top 40 off Radio 1 on Sunday. Nearer the harbour were clumps of Mods, bags of Rockers, a chain of Punks and even a few Teds. Teds're extinct in most towns, but Lyme Regis's famous for fossils 'cause of the shale cliffs. The Fossil Shop's fab. It sells conch shells with titchy red bulbs inside, but they were £4.75 and blowing all my money on one souvenir'd've been daft. (Instead I bought a series of thirteen dinosaur postcards. Each one's got a different dinosaur, but if you put them end to end in order, the background landscape joins up and forms a frieze. Moran'll be pretty jealous.) The trinkety shops're full of inflatable octopuses, stunt kites, buckets and spades. There were these pens. If you tilted them, a strip of colour slid away to reveal a naked lady whose bosoms're two sawn-off missiles. The strip'd slid down to her belly button when a voice said, 'You gonna buy that or what, sonny?'

I was concentrating on what the strip'd show next.

'Oy! You gonna buy that?' The shopkeeper meant me. I could see his blob of gum rolling round his mouth as his jaws opened and shut. His T-shirt had a picture of a giant dick with legs chasing something that looked like a hairy oyster on legs and the slogan, IT'S JUST ONE THING AFTER ANOTHER. (I still don't get that.) 'Or just stand there getting turned on?'

I fumblingly jabbed the pen back in its hole and scooted out, deep-frying in embarrassment.

The shopkeeper tossed, ‘Mucky little bugger!’ after me. ‘Buy yourself a dirty mag!’

LYME REGIS WILDEST DREAMS AMUSEMENT ARCADE's sort of built into the hillside park, on the sea front. Pudgy grim smoking men played this horse-racing game where you bet real money on plastic horses that move round a track. The track's under a glass shield to stop you nobbling the horses. Pudgy grim smoking women played bingo in a closed-off bit where a spangle-jacketed man calls out numbers and smiles like a bee. The arcade game part was darker so the screens glow brighter and Jean Michel Jarre music was on. I watched kids playing Pacman, Scrambler, Frogger and Grand Prix Racer. The Asteroids was out of order. There's a new game where you fight the giant robot horses from The Empire Strikes Back, but that was 50p a go. I changed a £1 note into 10p coins from a grebo in the booth reading KE-RRRANG!

The coins in my caged fist rattled like magic bullets.

Space Invaders first. The Taylor Method's to zap out a duct through my shelter and kill the aliens from a position of safety. It worked for a while but then an alien torpedoed me through my own duct. That's never happened before. My strategy collapsed and I didn't even clear the first screen.

Next I had a go on a kung fu game. I was MegaThor. But MegaThor just danced around like an electrocuted spazzo while Rex Rockster kicked the shit out of him. Kung fu games'll never catch on. I hurt my thumbnail more than I'd hurt Rex Rockster.

I wanted a go on air hockey where a plastic disc floats on a cushion of air. American kids're always playing it on TV. But you need another human. So I figured I'd get the money I'd wasted on MegaThor back from Eldorado Cascade. Eldorado Cascade's a sort of console where you roll 10p coins on to mirrored ledges. Moving walls push the coins teetering on the ledges on to the next ledge down; 10p coins falling off that ledge fall into your scoop. Loads of coins were ready to avalanche into my scoop.

Those teetering coins're glued on, I reckon. I lost 50p!

Then I saw this lush girl.

Three girls spilled out of the photo booth after the fourth nuclear flash. From Eldorado Cascade I'd been watching their six legs and thirty painted toes. Like Charlie's Angels, one was dark (but chinless), one was straw blonde (extra chin) and one was coppery-freckly. The dark one and the blonde one had a dribbly Cornetto each. (There was an ice-cream stall right by the photo booth.) They pressed their mouths against the slot where the photos come out and yelled unfunny orders into the machine, like, 'Get a move on!' When they got bored of that they ducked back into the booth, shared the earphones of a Sony Walkman and sang to 'Hungry Like The Wolf' by Duran Duran. But the copper one licked a sharp Zoom ice lolly and studied the ice-cream chart. Her top showed her belly button.

She wasn't as lush as Dawn Madden but I drifted over to study the ice-cream chart too. Magnets don't need to understand magnetism. She smelt of warm sand. Just standing near her made the tiny hairs on my arms ruffle.

I untucked my shirt to let it drape over my accelerating boner.

'Is that a Zoom?' God. I'd apparently spoken to the girl.

She looked at me. 'Yeah.' I fell a thousand feet up. 'Zooms're the best thing they've got here.' Her accent was like off Coronation Street in Manchester. 'Unless you're, like, into choc ices.'

'Okay. Thanks.'

I bought a Zoom off a person I remember absolutely nothing about.

'You on holiday too,' she spoke to me, 'or d'you live here, like?'

'Holiday.'

'We're from Blackburn.' She nodded at the other two, who hadn't noticed me yet. 'Where're you from?'

‘Uh...Black Swan Green.’ I was so nervous that even Hangman’d run off to hide somewhere. It makes no sense but it happens.

‘You what?’

‘It’s a village. In Worcestershire.’

‘Worcestershire? Is that in the middle somewhere?’

‘Yeah. It’s the most boring county, so no one ever knows where it is. Blackburn’s up north, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah. So, is Black Swan Green famous for black swans or green swans or something?’

‘No.’ What could I say that’d really impress her? ‘There aren’t even any white swans there.’

‘So there’re no swans in Black Swan Green?’

‘Yeah. It’s sort of a local joke.’

‘Oh. That’s pretty funny, really, isn’t it?’

‘Thanks.’ Sweat pinpricked out from fifty places on my body.

‘Dead nice here, in’t it?’

‘Oh, yeah.’ I wondered what to say next. ‘Dead nice.’

‘You going to eat that lolly, or what?’

The icy Zoom’d stuck to my fingertips. I tried to peel the paper wrapper off but it just shredded dead crappily.

‘You need a bit of technique, like.’ Her ruby fingertips took my Zoom and tore the end off the wrapper. She placed the torn end in her mouth and blew. The wrapper ballooned up, then just slid off. My hidden boner was about to explode, killing everyone in Wildest Dreams Amusements. She let the

wrapper drop to the floor and handed me back my Zoom. ‘Is that Smash Hits?’ She meant the 2000 AD summer special, still rolled up in my pocket.

Wished to hell it was.

‘Our Sally!’ The black-haired chinless girl came up and I hated her till the end of time. ‘Don’t tell me you’ve started your fishing trip already?’ (The straw girl giggled from her stool in the booth and I hated her too.) ‘You’re only one hour off the coach. What’s this one called then?’

I had to answer. ‘Jason.’

““Jason”!” She did this toffee-nosed accent. ‘I say! Sebastian’s playing polo with Jason on the croquet lawn! Rath-er! I say! Jason’s sucking a Zoom too, just like Sally! How Mr and Mrs! So have you got your rubber johnnies, Jason, ’cause at the rate Our Sally’s going you’ll need ‘em in the next thirty minutes.’

I floundered for a killer put-down line without any stammer words in it. And floundered, and floundered.

‘Or don’t they teach you biology at schools like yours?’

‘Stick your fat gob into everything,’ Sally snapped, ‘don’t you?’

‘Untwist your knickers, Our Sal! Only asking your new boyfriend if he knows the facts of life, like. Or is his thing bending over in the showers for prefects after a jolly good game of rugger?’

All the girls watched me to see how the boy’d defend himself.

My Zoom was dribbling down my wrist.

‘Why Tim put up with your fat nasty dirty trap,’ Sally folded her arms and jutted her hips out, ‘for so long before dumping you I’ll never know.’

I was turning invisible and there was nothing I could do.

‘I dumped him, for your information. And at least my boyfriend didn’t go munching up Wendy Lench the day after splitting up with me!’

‘That’s a lie, Melanie Pickett, and you know it!’

‘Under the coats,’ Melanie Pickett almost sang, ‘at Shirley Poolbrook’s party! Ask anyone who was there!’

The photo machine buzzed.

The straw one giggled. ‘I think the photos are done...’

A battalion of old ladies marched by from the bingo enclosure. I jumped into their ranks before the three girls noticed, and hurried back to the Hotel Excalibur. Boys are bastards, but they’re predictable bastards. You never know what girls’re thinking. Girls’re from another planet.

The beehive receptionist gave me the message than Dad's seminar was overrunning so he'd be a bit late. Greenland trainees were in the lobby, joking and comparing notes. I felt like a teacher's kid in a staffroom, so I went up to our room. It smells of net curtains, toast and toilet cleaner. The wallpaper's got eggy daffodils and the carpet's all melted flowers. The only things on TV were cricket where nobody scored and a Western where nobody shot anyone.

I read 2000 AD on my bed.

But I kept thinking about the three girls. Girls and girlfriends're worrying. Sex education's only about how to make babies and how not to make babies. What I need to know is what you do to turn ordinary girls like Sally from Blackburn into girlfriends you can snog and be seen snogging. I'm not sure if I really want to have sexual intercourse and I definitely don't want babies. Babies just poo and bawl. But not having a girlfriend means you're a homo or a total loser or both.

Melanie Pickett was half right. I don't know whether or not I know the facts of life. You can't ask adults 'cause you can't ask adults. You can't ask kids 'cause it'd be all round school by first break. So either everybody knows everything but nobody's saying anything, or else nobody knows anything and girlfriends just sort of...happen.

There was a knock at the door.

‘Jason,’ this young guy had a metallicky suit and a Paisley tie, ‘right?’

‘Right.’

He did a comedy finger-point at his GREENLAND SUPERMARKETS badge and a James Bond voice. ‘The name’s Lawlor...Danny Lawlor. Mike – your da...my boss, did I forget to mention? – sent me up to say he’s really sorry but he’s still being detained. The Emperor’s dropped by, unannounced.’

‘The Emperor?’

‘Emperor Craig Salt of Greenland. Best not say I called him that. Your da’s boss is Craig Salt. So all the managers are having to look after him in the manner to which he has become accustomed. So, Mike’s suggesting how’s about you and me go in search of the ultimate fish and chip shop?’

‘Now?’

‘Unless you’ve got a hot dinner date?’

‘No...’

‘Grand altogether. We’ll get you back in time for Chariots of Fire. Ah yes, my informants tell me everything. One mo, just let me unpin this absurd name badge...I’m a man, me, not a self-adhesive strip of letters embossed on a Dymo label printer...’

‘Don’t lean too far out!’ Danny and I watched the jellyfish below our feet dangling off the end of the sea wall. ‘If Michael Taylor’s sole male heir winds up in the drink, my career prospects will most surely join him.’

Sunlight on waves is drowsy tinsel.

‘You’d be okay if you fell in on the harbour side.’ I sculpted my Mr Whippy with my tongue. ‘You could scramble on to one of the fishing boats. But if you fell on the sea side, you might get sucked under.’

‘Let’s not,’ Danny rolled up his shirtsleeves, ‘put your theory to the test.’

‘The ice cream’s great, thanks. I’ve never had one with two Flakes in it. Did you pay extra?’

‘No. Your man on the stall’s a fellow Corkonian. We look after our own. Ah, but isn’t this the life, now, eh? Downright sadistic of Greenland to be holding their training conferences in a spot like this.’

‘What does “sadistic” mean?’

‘Unnecessarily cruel.’

‘Why’ (I’d noticed Danny likes questions) ‘is this sea wall called the “Cobb”? Is it just in Lyme Regis?’

‘Even my omniscience has its blind spots, young Jason.’

(If Dad doesn’t know the answer to a question, he spends ten sentences persuading himself that he does know.)

On the beach, well-behaved waves zipped and unzipped themselves. Mums rinsed off kids’ feet with buckets. Dads folded deckchairs and issued instructions.

‘Danny, do you know anyone in the IRA?’

‘You ask that just because I’m Irish?’

I nodded.

‘Well, Jason, no. Sorry to disappoint you. The Provos are busier up in Northern Ireland, the top bit. But back in Cork I do live in a turf hut with a leprechaun called Mick in my potato plot.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean—’

Danny held up a peaceful palm. ‘Accuracy on matters Irish is not the forte of the English. Truth is, we’re the friendliest people you’d wish to meet. Even north of the border. We just gun each other down occasionally, that’s all.’

Ice-cream drips snailed down the cone.

I don’t even know what I don’t know.

‘Will you look at those kites now! We didn’t have them when I was a kid!’ Danny was gazing at a couple of stunt kites with snaky ribbony tails. ‘Aren’t they something?’

We had to squint ’cause of the sun.

The tails doodlelooped red on blue, erasing themselves as they flew.

‘They,’ I agreed, ‘are epic.’

‘What’s Dad like to work for?’

The waitress at Cap’n Scallywag’s Fish’n’Chip Emporium arrived with our food. Danny leant back to let the tray land. ‘Michael Taylor, let me see. Well regarded...fair, thorough...doesn’t suffer fools gladly...he’s put in a good word or two for me at timely moments, for which I’m eternally grateful...that do you?’

‘Sure.’ I doused my fish with ketchup from a tomato-shaped squirter. Funny to hear Dad discussed as Michael Taylor. Along the promenade, strings of boiled-fruit lights lit up.

‘Looks like you’re enjoying that.’

‘I love fish and chips. Thanks.’

‘Your da’s paying.’ Danny’d ordered scampi, bread and a side salad to build a sandwich. ‘Remember to thank him.’ He turned to the first waitress and asked for a can of 7-Up. A second waitress hurried over with it and asked if the food was okay.

‘Oh,’ said Danny, ‘glorious.’

She sort of leaned at Danny, like he was a log fire. ‘Would your brother like anything to drink too?’

Danny winked at me.

‘Tango’ (pleasure from being mistaken for Danny’s brother wasn’t quite wrecked by Hangman not letting me say the ‘seven’ in 7-Up). ‘Please.’

The first waitress fetched me one. ‘Here on holiday?’

‘Business.’ Danny breathed mystery into this dull word. ‘Business.’

More customers came in and the waitresses went.

Danny did this funny look. ‘We should make a double act.’

Happy frying noises spat in Cap’n Scallywag’s kitchen.

‘One Step Beyond’ by Madness came on.

‘Have you got’ (I chickened out of saying ‘a girlfriend’) ‘any brothers and sisters?’

‘That depends,’ Danny never hurries his mouthfuls, ‘on your mode of accountancy. I grew up in an orphanage.’

God. ‘Like Dr Barnardo’s?’

‘A Catholic equivalent, with more Jesus in the diet. Not enough to cause any lasting damage.’

I chewed. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be.’ Danny’d handled this a billion times. ‘I’m not embarrassed about it. Why should you be?’

‘So’ – Julia or Mum’d’ve politely changed the subject – ‘did something bad happen to your mum and dad?’

‘Only each other. Pass us the ketchup. They’re still alive and rocking – not together – as far as I know, but, well, hey. A few experiments with foster parents did not end happily. I was what’s known as a “feisty child”. In the end the state agreed I was best off with the Jesuit Brothers.’

‘Who’re they?’

‘The Jesuits? A venerable religious order. Monks.’

‘Monks?’

‘Real live monks. They ran the orphanage. Oh, you had your usual quota of humourless bigots, but a fair share of fierce good educators. Lots of us got through university on scholarships alone. We were fed, clothed, cared

for. Santy visited, come Christmas. Parties every birthday. Clover compared to growing up in a shanty town in Bangladesh or Mombasa or Lima or five hundred other locations I could name. We learned how to improvise, how to look out for ourselves, what not to take for granted. All handy business skills. Why mope around going, like, “Woe is me!”?”

‘Don’t you ever want to meet your real parents?’

‘Not a lad to beat around the bush, are you?’ Danny folded his arms behind his head. ‘Parents. Irish law’s a little murky on this one, but my biological mother’s people live up in Sligo. They own a posh hotel or some such. One time, I’d’ve been around your age, I took it into my head to run off to find her. I got as far as Limerick bus station.’

‘What happened there?’

‘Thunder, lightning, hailstones, fireballs. Biggest storm in years. My connecting bus was held up by a collapsed bridge. When the sun came out again, so did my sense of reality. So I scuttled back to the Jesuits.’

‘Did you get into trouble?’

‘The Jesuits ran an orphanage, not a prison camp.’

‘So...that was that?’

‘Yup. For now.’ Danny balanced his fork on his thumb. ‘What we – orphans, I mean – miss, or lack, or want, or need, are photographs of people who look like you. That never goes away. One fine day, I’ll make it up to Sligo to see if I can take some. With a telephoto lens, if my nerve gives out. But these great big life...“issues”...won’t be hurried. Ripeness, young Jason, is all. Scampi butty?’

‘No thanks.’ While Danny’d been talking, a decision’d made itself. ‘Will you help me buy one of those stunt kites?’

Greenland trainees'd colonized the whole lounge of the Hotel Excalibur. They'd changed out of their suits into herring-bone trousers and baggy shirts. As Danny and I walked in, they smirked our way. I knew why. Looking after their boss's son was a creep's job. One called out, 'Daniel the Spaniel!' and grinned the exact grin Ross Wilcox's got. 'Coming to inspect the nocturnal birds of Dorset?'

'Wiggsy,' Danny lobbed back, 'you're a drunken sot and a reprobate and you cheat at squash. Why would anyone want to be seen dead in public with yourself?'

The guy looked delighted.

'Want to say hello,' Danny turned to me, 'to the Young Greenlanders?'

That'd be hell. 'Is it okay if I just go upstairs and wait for Dad there?'

'Don't blame you in the least. I'll tell him where you are.' Then Danny shook hands with me, like I was a colleague. 'Thanks for your company. See you in the morning?'

'Sure.'

'Enjoy your film.'

I got the key and bounded upstairs instead of waiting for the lift. In my head I listened to the Vangelis music for Chariots of Fire to flush away Wiggsy and the Greenlanders. Not Danny, though. Danny's ace.

The alarm radio said 7:15 but no sign of Dad yet. Chariots of Fire began at 7:30, said the poster. I'd memorized the route to the cinema to impress Dad. Seven twenty-five came. Dad doesn't forget appointments. He'd be coming. We'd miss the adverts and Coming Soons, but a lady with a torch'd show us our seats for the film. Seven twenty-eight. Should I go downstairs and remind him? I decided not to, in case we missed each other. Then it'd all be my fault for not sticking to the plan. Seven thirty. We'd have to spend some time working out who was who but the film'd still be watchable. At 7:35 Dad's footsteps came thumping down the corridor outside. 'Right!' he'd burst in. 'Off we go!'

The footsteps thumped past our door. They didn't come back.

The eggy daffodils on the wallpaper'd fossilized to slag-heap grey as the day ended. I hadn't turned on the light. Witchy laughter leaked into the room and music welled up from pubs all around Lyme Regis. TV'd've been pretty good 'cause it was Saturday night but Dad'd've felt guiltier if he'd found me in silence. I wondered what Sally from the amusement arcade'd be doing now. Being kissed. A boy'd be stroking those soft bare inches between her jeans and her top. Someone like Gary Drake or Neal Brose or Duncan Priest. My memory was vague so to pass the time I made her up. I sculpted Sally's breasts like Debby Crombie's. I gave her Kate Alfrick's hair, silking round her naked throat. I gave her a face transplant from Dawn Madden, not forgetting Dawn Madden's sadistic eyes. Mademoiselle Crommelynck's slightly upturned nose. Debbie Harry's raspberry-cream lips.

Sally, the lost Pick'n'Mix girl.

If Dad guessed I was trying to make him feel guilty, that'd give him the excuse to not let me. So after nine o'clock, I switched on the reading lamp and read *Watership Down*. Up to the bit where Bigwig faces up to General Woundwort. Moths kept tapping on the window. Insects crawled over the glass like skaters on ice. A key turned in the lock and Dad tripped into the room. 'Ah, Jason, here you are.'

Where else'd I be? I dared myself to not reply to Dad.

He didn't notice I was sulking. 'Chariots of Speed'll have to take a rain-check.' Dad's voice was far too loud for the room. 'Craig Salt turned up halfway through my seminar.'

'Danny Lawlor told me,' I said.

'Craig Salt's yacht's over in Poole so he drove over to address the troops. Couldn't just swan off to the local flea-pit with you, I'm afraid.'

'Right,' I said, in Mum's flattest voice.

'Danny and you had dinner, right?'

'Right.'

'The world of work's about these kinds of sacrifices. Craig Salt's taking us managers out to some place somewhere near Charmouth, so you'll probably be asleep by the time I—' Dad saw my kite, propped up against the radiator. 'What's this you've been spending your money on?'

Dad always picks fault with what I buy. If it isn't tat from Taiwan, I paid far too much for something I'll only use twice. If he can't see a problem he'll make one up, like that time I bought BMX transfers for my bike and he made a massive drama out of getting out insurance forms and altering the 'Description' box. It's so unfair. I don't criticize how he spends his money.

‘A kite.’

‘So I see...’ Dad’d already slid my kite out of its wrapper. ‘What a beaut! Did Danny help you choose it?’

‘Yes.’ I didn’t want to be pleased he was pleased. ‘A bit.’

‘Fancy you buying yourself a kite.’ Dad peered down its spine. ‘Hey, let’s get up at the crack of dawn. We’ll try it out down on the beach! Just you and me, right? Before all the little tourists stake out every square inch, right?’

‘Right, Dad.’

‘Crack of dawn!’

I cleaned my teeth without mercy.

Mum and Dad can be as ratty or sarcastic or angry as they want to me, but if I ever show a flicker of being pissed off then they act like I've murdered babies. I hate them for that. But I hate my guts for never standing up to Dad like Julia does. So I hate their guts for making me hate my guts. Kids can never complain about unfairness 'cause everyone knows kids always complain about that. 'Life isn't fair, Jason, and the sooner you learn that, the better.' So there. That's that sorted. It's fine for Mum and Dad to scrunch up any promise they make to me and flush it down the bog, and why?

Because life isn't fair, Jason.

My eyes fell on Dad's electric shaver box.

I got the shaver out, just because. Snug as an unswitched-on light sabre.

Plug it in, whispered Unborn Twin from the corners of the bathroom.
Dare you.

It came to life and buzzed my entire skeleton.

Dad'd kill me for doing this. It's so obvious that I mustn't touch his shaver, he's never even told me not to. But Dad hadn't even bothered telling me to go to Chariots of Fire on my own. His shaver came closer to the bumfluff on my upper lip...closer...

It bit me!

I unplugged it.

Oh God. Now my bumfluff had a ridiculous patch missing.

Maggot whimpered, What have you done?

In the morning Dad'd see and it'd be all too obvious what I'd done. My one hope was to shave the whole fuzz off. Surely Dad'd notice that, too?

But I had nothing to lose. The shaver tickled. On a scale of 0 to 10, 3.

The shaver hurt a bit, too. On a scale of 0 to 10, 11 4.

I panickily examined the results. My face did look different, but it'd be hard to put your finger on how, exactly.

I ran my finger along where my fuzz'd been.

Not even cold milk was so smooth.

I accidentally flicked open the blade cover. Dad's gritty stubble and my almost invisible fur snowed together on to the white porcelain sink.

Lying on my chest, my front ribs sank into my back.

Thirsty now, I needed a glass of water.

I got a glass of water. Water in Lyme Regis tastes of paper. I couldn't get to sleep on my side. My bladder'd ballooned.

I took a long piss, wondering if girls'd like me more if I had more scars. (All I've got is a nick on my thumb where I was bitten by my cousin Nigel's guinea pig when I was nine. My cousin Hugo said the guinea pig had myxomatosis and I'd die, in foaming agony, thinking I was a rabbit. I believed him. I even wrote a will. The scar's nearly gone now but it bled like shook-up cherryade at the time.)

Lying on my back, my back ribs pressed into my chest.

Too hot, I took my pyjama top off.

Too cool, I put my pyjama top on.

The cinema'd be emptying after Chariots of Fire now. The lady with the torch'd be going up and down the aisles putting popcorn cones and Fruit Gum boxes and empty Malteser bags into a bin bag. Sally from Blackburn and her new boyfriend'd be stepping outside, saying what a great film it'd been, though they'd've been snogging and stroking each other all the way through. Sally's boyfriend'd be saying, 'Let's go to a disco.' Sally'd answer, 'No. Let's go to the camper van. The others won't be back for a while.'

That song by UB40 called 'One In Ten' thumped up through the bones of Hotel Excalibur.

The moon'd dissolved my eyelids.

Time'd turned to treacle.

‘Oh sod soddy sod it and sod Craig sodding Salt too, the sodding sod!’

Dad’d fallen over the carpet.

I didn’t let him know he’d woken me for two reasons: (a) I wasn’t ready to forgive him; (b) he was banging into things like a comedy drunk and pub fumes wafted off him and if he was going to bollock me for using his shaver, tomorrow morning’d be better. Dean Moran’s right. Seeing your Dad pissed’s dead disturbing.

Dad made his way to the bathroom like he was in zero gravity. I heard him undo his zip. He tried to piss quietly on to the porcelain.

Piss drummed on the bathroom floor.

A wavery second later it chundered into the bog.

The piss lasted forty-three seconds. (My record’s fifty-two.)

He pulled out loads of bog paper to mop up the spillage.

Then Dad switched on the shower and got in.

Maybe a minute passed before I heard a ripping noise, a dozen plastic pings, a thump and a growly Sod it!

I opened my eyes a slit and nearly yelled in fright.

The bathroom door’d opened by itself. Dad stood with his head in a turban of shampoo wielding a broken shower-rail. Stark raving nuddy, he was, but right where my sack-and-acorn is, Dad’s got this wobbling chunky length of oxtail. Just hanging there!

His pubes’re as thick as a buffalo’s beard! (I’ve only got nine.)

The grossest sight I ever saw.

Dad's snorey skonks and flobberglobbers're impossible to sleep through. No wonder my parents don't sleep in the same bedroom. The shock of seeing Dad's thing's dying down now. A bit. But will I just wake up one morning and find that rope between my legs? It horrifies me to think that about fourteen years ago the spermatozoon that turned into me shot out of that.

Will I be some kid's dad one day? Are any future people lurking deep inside mine? I've never even ejaculated, apart from in a dream of Dawn Madden. Which girl's carrying the other half of my kid, deep in those intricate loops? What's she doing right now? What's her name?

Too much to think about.

I s'pose Dad'll have a hangover tomorrow morning.

Today morning.

Chances of us flying my kite on the beach at the crack of dawn?

Big fat zero.



‘The wind blows north,’ Dad had to shout, ‘from Normandy, over the Channel, smacks into these cliffs and ally-oop, a thermal updraught! Perfect for kites!’

‘Perfect!’ I shouted too.

‘Breathe this air in deep, Jason! Good for your hayfever! Sea air’s chock full of ozone!’

Dad hogged the kite spool so I took another warm jam doughnut.

‘Tonic for the troops, eh?’

I smiled back. It’s epic being up at the crack of dawn. A red setter raced ghost-dogs through the bellyflopping waves on the shore. Shale pooed from the cliffs off towards Charmouth. Mucky clouds lidded the sunrise but today was bags windier and better for kite-flying.

Dad shouted something.

‘What?’

‘The kite! Its background blends into the clouds! Looks like it’s just the dragon flying up there! What a beaut you picked! I’ve worked out how to do a double loop!’ Dad had that smile you never see in photos. ‘She rules the skies!’ He edged a bit closer so he didn’t have to shout so much. ‘When I was your age, my dad’d take me out on Morecambe Bay of an afternoon – Grange-over-Sands – and we’d fly kites there. Made ’em ourselves in those days...Bamboo, wallpaper, string and milk-bottle tops for the tail...’

‘Will you show me’ (Hangman blocked ‘some time’) ‘one day?’

‘Course I will. Hey! Know how to send a kite-telegram?’

‘No.’

‘Righto, hold her for a moment...’ Dad passed me the spool and got a Biro from his anorak. Then he got the square of gold paper from his cigarettes. He didn’t have anything to rest on so I knelt by him like a squire being knighted so he could rest on my back. ‘What message shall we send up?’

““Mum and Julia, Wish You Were Here”.”

‘You’re the boss.’ Dad pressed hard so I felt the Biro trace each letter through my clothes and on to my back. ‘Up you get.’ Then Dad twizzled the gold paper round the kite string like a sandwich-bag fastener. ‘Wobble the line. That’s it. Up and down.’

The telegram started sliding up the kite-string, against gravity. Pretty soon it was out of sight. But you knew the message'd get there.

‘*Lytoceras fimbriatum*.’

I blinked at Dad, not knowing what on earth he’d said. We stepped apart to let the wheezy fossil-shop owner lug a signboard outside.

‘*Lytoceras fimbriatum*.’ Dad nodded at the spiral fossil in my hand. ‘Its Latin name. Ammonite family. You can tell by these close tight ribs it’s got, with these extra-fat ones every so often...’

‘You’re right!’ I checked the tiny writing on the shelf. ‘Ly-to-ce-ras—’

‘Fimbriatum. Fancy me being right.’

‘Since when did you know about fossils and Latin names?’

‘My dad was a bit of a rock-hound. He used to let me catalogue his specimens. But only if I learnt them properly. I’ve forgotten most of them now, of course, but my dad’s *Lytoceras* was enormous. It’s stuck in my memory.’

‘What’s a rock-hound?’

‘Amateur geologist. Most holidays, he’d find an excuse to go off fossil-hunting with a little hammer he kept. I think I’ve still got it somewhere. Some of the fossils he got in Cyprus and India are in Lancaster Museum, last time I looked.’

‘I never knew.’ The fossil fitted into my cupped hands. ‘Is it rare?’

‘Not especially. That one’s a nice one, though.’

‘How old is it?’

‘Hundred and fifty million years? A whippersnapper among ammonites, really. What say we buy it for you?’

‘Really?’

‘Don’t you like it?’

‘I love it.’

‘Your first fossil, then. An educational souvenir.’

Do spirals end? Or just get so tiny your eyes can’t follow any more?

Seagulls strutted in the dustbins outside Cap'n Scallywag's. I was walking along still staring into my ammonite when an elbow swung out of nowhere and knocked my head backwards on its hinge.

'Jason!' snapped Dad. 'Look where you're going!'

My nose gonged with pain. I wanted to sneeze but couldn't.

The jogger rubbed his arm. 'No permanent damage, Mike. The Red Cross chopper can stay on its helipad.'

'Craig! Good God!'

'Out for my morning fix, Mike. This human bumper car's your handiwork, I take it?'

'Right first time, Craig. That's Jason, my youngest.'

The only Craig Dad knows is Craig Salt. This tanned man matched what I'd heard. 'If I'd been a truck, young fella-me-lad,' he told me, 'you'd be a pancake.'

'Trucks aren't allowed down here.' My crushed nose made my voice honk. 'It's just for pedestrians.'

'Jason,' the Dad out here and the Dad in the fossil shop just weren't the same person, 'apologize to Mr Salt! If you'd tripped him you could've caused a serious injury.'

Kick the wazzock's shins, said Unborn Twin.

'I'm really sorry, Mr Salt.' Wazzock.

'I'll forgive you, Jason, thousands wouldn't. What's this? Bit of a fossil-collector, are we? May I?' Craig Salt just took my ammonite. 'Nice little trilobite, that. Bit of worm damage on this side. But not too bad.'

‘It’s not a trilobite. It’s a Ly-to—’ (Hangman blocked ‘Lytoceras’ in mid-word.) ‘It’s a type of ammonite, isn’t it, Dad?’

Dad wasn’t meeting my eyes. ‘If Mr Salt’s sure, Jason—’

‘Mr Salt,’ Craig Salt plopped my ammonite back, ‘is sure.’

Dad just had this weedy smile.

‘If anyone’s sold you this fossil as anything but a trilobite, sue ’em. Your dad and I know a good lawyer, eh, Mike? Well. Must clock up another mile or two before breakfast. Then it’s back to Poole. See if my family have sunk my yacht yet.’

‘Wow, have you got a yacht, Mr Salt?’

Craig Salt’d scented my sarcasm but couldn’t act on it.

I stared back, innocent, defiant and surprised at myself.

‘Only a forty-footer!’ Dad said it like the man-of-the-sea he isn’t. ‘Craig, the trainees were saying what a pleasure it was yesterday to—’

‘Ah, yes, Mike. Knew there was something else. Would’ve been unprofessional of me to bring it up in front of the Great White Hopes at the hotel, Mike, but we need to talk urgently about Gloucester. Last quarter’s accounts are making me mucho depressedo. Swindon’s going straight down the bloody toilet as far as I can see.’

‘Absolutely, Craig. I’ve got some new concepts for in-store promotions we can kick about in the long grass and—’

‘It’s arse-kicking we need, not grass-kicking. Expect a call from me on Wednesday.’

‘Looking forward to it, Craig. I’ll be in the Oxford office.’

‘I know where all my area managers are. Be more careful, Jason, or you’ll cause someone an injury. Yourself, perhaps. Until Wednesday, Mike.’

Dad and I watched Craig Salt jog down the promenade.

‘What say,’ Dad’s jolliness was forced and feeble, ‘we get ourselves that bacon sandwich?’

But I couldn’t speak to Dad.

‘Hungry?’ Dad put his hand on my shoulder. ‘Jason?’

I nearly biffed his hand away and flung my shitty ‘trilobite’ into the shitty sea.

Nearly.



‘So while I’m neck-deep in shipping notices, stock inventories, mailing lists and artistic temperaments,’ Mum adjusted the mirror to perfect her lipstick, ‘you get to swan around Cheltenham all morning like Lord Muck! All right for some, eh?’

‘I guess so.’

Mum’s Datsun Cherry smells of Mint Imperials.

‘Ah, you’ll have a whale of a time! Now, Agnes says Chariots of Fire starts at twenty-five to two, so grab yourself a sausage roll or something for lunch, and get back to the gallery by...’ Mum checked her watch. ‘...a quarter past one.’

‘Okay.’

We got out of the Datsun. ‘Morning, Helena!’ A crew-cut man marched by to where a van was docking into a delivery bay. ‘Proper scorcher we’re in for, today’s forecast says.’

‘About time we had a bit of summer. Alan, this is my son, Jason.’

I got a crooked grin and a jokey salute. Dad wouldn’t like Alan.

‘Being as you’re sort of on holiday, Jason, why don’t I...’ From her purse Mum unfolded a crisp five-pound note.

‘Thanks!’ I don’t know why they’re being so generous at the moment. ‘That’s as much as Dad gave me in Lyme Regis!’

‘Silly me – I meant to give you a ten...’

Back went the fiver and out came a tenner! That made £28.70.

‘Thanks very much.’

I’d need every last penny.

‘Antique shops?’ The woman in Tourist Information began memorizing my features in case a robbery was reported later. ‘Why do you want antique shops? The best bargains are in the charity shops.’

‘It’s my mum’s birthday,’ I lied. ‘She likes vases.’

‘Oh. For Mum? Oh! Isn’t Mum lucky having you as a son?’

‘Uh...’ She made me nervous. ‘...thanks.’

‘Lucky, lucky Mum! I have a son as lovely as you, too.’ She flashed me a photo of a fat baby. ‘Twenty-six years ago, this, but he’s still as adorable! Pips doesn’t always remember my birthday, mind, but he’s got a heart of gold. That’s what counts, at the end of the day. Father was a waste of space, sorry to say. Pips hated the pig as much as I did. The men’ (she made a just-swallowed-bleach face) ‘just fire out their snot, roll over and that’s it, goodnight. The men don’t grow sons, feed them with their own milk, wipe their botties, powder their,’ she cooed at me but the bird of prey was back in her eyes, ‘little snails. A father will always turn on his son in the end. Only room for one cock-of-the-walk in any farmyard, thank you very much. But I showed Pippin’s father the door when Pips turned ten. Yvette was fifteen. Yvette says Pippin’s old enough to be living on his own, now, but that miss has forgotten who’s the mother and who’s the daughter since she got a pay-in-instalments wedding ring on her finger. Yvette forgets it’s thanks to me that that little Jezebel from Colwall didn’t get her sharp little claws into Pippin. Seduce him into some entanglement. Yvette’s still thick as thieves with that’ – the foamy lady nodded at the empty doorway – ‘clot. Her father. The pig. The dolt. Who else put the idea into her head? Poking her pointy beak into where Pips keeps our little pick-me-ups? A mother needs a little pick-me-up occasionally, my pet. God made us mothers but He didn’t make it easy for us to stay on top of things. Pips understands. Pips says, “Let’s call these pills yours, Mum. They’re our secret, but say, if anyone asks, they’re yours.” Pippin’s not so nicely spoken as you, my pet, but his heart’s twenty-four-carat. But do you know what Yvette did to our pick-me-ups? Turned up uninvited one afternoon and without so much as a by your

leave, she flushed them down the lavvy! My, Pippin turned the air blue when he got home and found out! Hit the roof! It was “my effing stock” this, “my effing stock” that! Never seen the boy in such a state! Went round to Yvette’s and, well, did he put her pointy beak out of joint!’ Her face clouded. ‘Yvette called the coppers. Shopped her own brother! He’d only biffed that froglet of a husband of hers a little bit! But Pips just disappeared after that. Days on end now, neither hide nor hair. All I want is a phone call from my son, my pet. Just to tell me he’s looking after himself proper. Some nasty types keep knocking our door down. The police are just as bad. “Where’s the effing gear this? Where’s the effing money that? Where’s your son gone you effing old bitch?” Oh, filthy language, they’ve got. But even if I had heard from Pips, I’d rather die than breathe a word...’

I opened my mouth to remind her about the antique shops.

She shuddered out a sigh. ‘I’d rather die...’

‘So, uh, could you give me a map of Cheltenham with the antique shops marked on it?’

‘No, pet. I don’t work here. Ask that lady behind the desk.’

The first antique shop was called George Pines, out on a ring road, wedged between a betting shop and an off-licence. Cheltenham's s'posed to be posh but posh towns've got dodgy areas too. You cross a boomy rusting footbridge to get there. George Pines wasn't what you have in mind when you think 'antique shop'. The doors and windows had grilles. A note was Sellotaped to the (locked) door saying, BACK IN 15 MINS but the ink'd gone ghostly and the paper'd faded. A notice said, BEST RATES FOR HOUSE CLEARANCES. Through the grimy window it was all ugly big sideboards you get in grandparents' bungalows. No clocks, no watches.

George Pines was long gone.

As I was walking back over the footbridge these two kids came towards me. They looked my own age but they'd got red-laced Docs. One wore a Quadrophenia T-shirt, the other an RAF T-shirt. Their footsteps boomed in time, left-right left-right. If you look kids in the eye it means you reckon you're as hard as they are. I was carrying a fortune in cash so I kept my eyes sideways and down, on the fumeey river of loud trucks and slow tankers flowing underneath us. But as the two Mods approached, I knew they wouldn't go into single file to let me by. So I had to squeeze myself against the sun-hot railing.

'Got a light?' grunted the taller one at me.

I swallowed. 'Me?'

'Nah, I'm talkin' to Princess fuckin' Diana.'

'No.' I gripped the rail tight. 'Sorry.'

The other Mod grunted, 'Poof.'

After the nuclear war, kids like them'll rule what's left. It'll be hell.

Most of the morning'd gone before I found the second antique shop. An arch led into a cobbled square called Hythloday Mews. Wails of far-off babies spiralled round Hythloday Mews. Lacy curtains blew over window boxes. A sleek black Porsche lay waiting for its master. Sunflowers watched me from their warm wall. Here was the sign, HOUSE OF GILES. The dazzling outside hid the inside. The door was propped open by a droopy pygmy with a sign round his neck saying, YES, WE'RE OPEN! Inside smelt of brown paper and wax. Cool as stones in streams. Murky cabinets of medals, of glasses, of swords. A Welsh dresser bigger than my bedroom hid the deepest quarter from sight. From here, a scratchy noise started up. The noise unfogged itself into radio cricket.

The noise of a knife on a chopping board.

I peered round the dresser.

'If I'd known I'd end up with this mess,' the dark American woman purred at me, 'I'd have gotten the freakin' cherries.' (She was sort of beautiful but too off another planet to be fanciable.) In her sticky hands dripped a greeny-red fruit the shape of a strange egg. 'Cherries are the fruit. Pop 'em in, slide out the stone, masticate, swallow, finito. None of this... spatter and gore.'

My first words to a real live American were, 'What fruit's that?'

'Know what a mango is?'

'No, sorry.'

'Why apologize? You're English! You don't know real food from freakin' polystyrene. Try some?'

You can't take sweets from pervy men in parks, but exotic fruit from antique shopkeepers is probably okay. 'Okay.'

The woman shaved off a fat sliver into a glass bowl. She stuck a tiny silver fork into it. ‘Rest your feet a moment.’

I sat on a wicker stool and lifted the bowl to my mouth.

The slippery fruit slid on to my tongue.

God, mango’s gorgeous...perfumed peaches, bruised roses.

‘So what’s the verdict?’

‘It’s absolutely—’

The cricket commentary suddenly went crazy. ‘—entire audience here at the Oval is on its feet, as Botham notches up another superb century! Geoffrey Boycott is running over to congratulate—’

‘Botham?’ The woman went to red alert. ‘That’s Ian Botham, right?’

I nodded.

‘Shaggy like Chewbacca? Broken Roman nose? Barbarian eyes? Masculinity wrapped in cricket whites?’

‘That’s probably him.’

‘Oh.’ She crossed her hands over her bosomless chest like the Virgin Mary. ‘I would walk on burning embers.’ We listened to more radio applause as we finished the mango. ‘So.’ She carefully wiped her fingers on a damp flannel and switched the radio off. ‘Can I sell you a Jacobean four-poster bed? Or do the tax inspectors keep getting younger?’

‘Uh...have you got an Omega Seamaster please?’

‘An “Ohmeega Seamaster”? That’s a boat?’

‘No, it’s a watch. They stopped making them in 1958. It has to be a model called a “de Ville”.’

‘Alas, Giles doesn’t do watches, honey. He doesn’t want people bringing them back if they don’t run.’

‘Oh.’ That was it. Nowhere else in Cheltenham.

The American woman studied me. ‘I may know a specialist dealer...’

‘A watch dealer? Here in Cheltenham?’

‘No, he operates out of South Kensington. Want me to call him?’

‘Would you? I’ve got £28.75.’

‘Keep your cards closer to your chest than that, honey. Let me see if I can find his number in this bordello Giles calls his office...’

'Hi, Jock? Rosamund. Uh-huh. No...no, I'm playing shop. Giles is out vulturing somewhere. Some duchess with a big country house has died. Or a countess. Or a largesse. I don't know, we don't do queens where I come from, Jock, well, not queens who dress like they're serving life in fashion prison...What's that? Oh, Giles did tell me, it was someplace quaint, in the Cotswolds, English-sounding...Brideshead – no, that was the TV series, right? It's on the tip of my tongue – Codpiece-under-Water...No, Jock, I'd tell you if...What's that?...Uh-huh, I know there are no secrets between... Uh-huh, Giles loves you like a brother, too. But listen up, Jock. I have a young man here in the shop...Oh, hilarious, Jock, no wonder you're such a pin-up with the London arthritic...This young man is after an Ohmeega Seamaster' (she checked with me and I mouthed 'de Ville' at her) "'de Ville" ...Uh-huh. You're familiar with that model?'

The pause was somehow promising.

'Oh, you are?'

The moment before you win you know you've won.

'In front of you? Well, how fortunate I called! Uh-huh...Mint condition? Oh, Jock, this is getting better...so serendipitous...Listen, Jock, about the shekels...we have a budgetary situation here that...Uh-huh...Yes, Jock, if they stopped making them in the fifties they must be hard to come by, I see that...I know you're not a registered charity...' (She mimed me a yapping yapbird with her hand.) 'If you didn't breed like a buck-rabbit with every she-bunny who raises her fluffy tail your way, Jock, you wouldn't have so many children on the brink of starvation. Just give me your best price?... Uh-huh...Well, I think it might...Uh-huh. If he does, I'll call you back.'

The phone pinged in its cradle.

'He had one? An Omega Seamaster?'

'Uh-huh.' Rosamund looked sorry. 'If you can stretch to £850, he'll courier it to your house once your cheque has cleared.'

Eight hundred and fifty pounds?

‘More mango, honey?’

‘So let me get this straight, Jason. You broke this freakin’ watch of your grandfather’s – quite by accident – in January?’ (I nodded.) ‘And you’ve spent the last eight months scurrying around for a replacement?’ (I nodded.) ‘On the resources of a thirteen-year-old?’ (I nodded.) ‘By bicycle?’ (I nodded.) ‘Wouldn’t it be a whole load easier just to confess? Take your punishment like a man, then get on with your life?’

‘My parents’d murder me. Literally.’

‘What’s that? They’d murder you? Literally?’ Rosamund sealed in a mock scream with her hands. ‘Kill their own offspring? For breaking a freakin’ watch? How did they dispose of your siblings when they broke things? Flush them down the john, joint by joint? Doesn’t the plumber find their bones when he unblocks the pipes?’

‘Okay, not literally murder me, but they’d go mental. It’s like...my greatest fear.’

‘Uh-huh. And how long will they stay “mental”? The term of your natural life? Twenty years? No possibility of parole?’

‘Not that long, obviously, but—’

‘Uh-huh. Eight months?’

‘Several days, definitely.’

‘What’s that? Several days? Holy shit, Jason.’

‘More than that. A week, most like. And they’d never let me forget it.’

‘Uh-huh. And how many weeks can you expect to remain in your mortal coil?’

‘I’m—’ (Hangman blocked my ‘sorry?’) ‘I don’t quite get you.’

‘Well, how many weeks are there in a year?’

‘Fifty-two.’

‘Uh-huh. And how many years are you alive for?’

‘It depends. Seventy.’

‘Seventy-five years, unless you worry yourself to death first. Okay. Fifty-two multiplied by seventy-five equals...’ She tapped the sum into a calculator. ‘Three thousand, nine hundred weeks. So. You tell me your greatest fear is that Ma and Pa’ll be mad at you for one of these almost four-thousand weeks. Or two. Or three.’ Rosamund puffed out her cheeks, then huffed out the air. ‘Can I swap your greatest fear for any one of mine? Take two of them. No, ten. Help yourself to a barrow-load. Please?’

A low-flying Tornado rattled all Cheltenham’s windows.

‘It’s a watch you broke! Not a future. Not a life. Not a backbone.’

‘You don’t know my parents.’ I sounded sulky.

‘The question here is, “Do you?”’

‘Of course I do. We live in the same house.’

‘You break my heart, Jason. Oh, you break my freakin’ heart.’

Outside Hythloday Mews I realized I'd left my map on Rosamund's table, so I went back to get it. The blue door behind the desk'd swung open, showing a tiny bog. Rosamund was taking a thundering piss, booming 'Row Row Row the Boat Gently Down the Stream' in a foreign language. Women had to sit down to pee, I'd always believed, but Rosamund pissed standing with her skirt hoiked up to her bum. My cousin Hugo Lamb says in America they've got these rubber willies for Women's Lib women. Maybe Rosamund had one. Her legs were hairier than Dad's, mind, which is pretty unusual for women, I thought. I was dead embarrassed, so I just took my map, quietly left and walked back towards Mum's gallery. In an unfriendly baker's I bought a sausage roll and sat down in a triangle of park. The sycamores're tatty now August's almost over. BACK TO SCHOOL posters're in the shops. These last days of freedom rattle like a nearly empty box of Tic-Tacs.

Till today I thought replacing my granddad's Omega'd just be a matter of tracking one down. But now the problem's about getting hold of hundreds of pounds. I chewed my sausage roll, wondering how I could (a) lie to explain the watch's disappearance and (b) make it not my fault and (c) make the lie invulnerable to questioning.

It can't be done.

Sausage rolls start off tasting lovely but by the time you finish them they taste of peppery pig bollock. According to Julia that's exactly what sausage rolls're made of.

Mum's friend Yasmin Morton-Bagot owns La Boîte aux Mille Surprises, but Mum manages it with an assistant called Agnes. (Dad calls it 'La Bot' as in 'bottom' for a joke, but 'boîte' means 'box.') La Boîte aux Mille Surprises is half-shop, half-gallery. The shop part sells stuff you can't buy outside London. Fountain pens from Paris, chess sets from Iceland, atomic clocks from Austria, jewellery from Yugoslavia, masks from Burma. The back room's the gallery. Customers come from all over England 'cause Yasmin Morton-Bagot knows artists all over the world. The most expensive painting at the moment's by Volker Oldenburg. Volker Oldenburg paints modern art in a potato cellar in West Berlin. I'm not sure what Tunnel #9 is a picture of but it costs £1,950.

Thirteen years of pocket money is £1,950.

'We're celebrating, Jason.' Agnes's got a slidey Welsh accent so I don't always know if I've heard her right. 'Your mum sold a painting just now.'

'Great. One of the expensive ones?'

'One of the very, very expensive ones.'

'Hello, darling,' Mum appeared from the gallery. 'Nice morning?'

'Uh' (Hangman stopped the 'not' of 'not bad') 'fine. Agnes says you just' (Hangman blocked 'sold') 'a customer bought a picture.'

'Oh, he was in the mood for a bit of a plunge.'

'Helena,' Agnes went stern, 'you had him eating out of your hand. That bit about cars losing value but art always gaining. You could have sold him Gloucestershire.'

Then I saw this lush girl.

All three of them were sixteen, I'd say, and rich. One sidekick had a stoaty meanness and acne not even ornate make-up could cover. The other sidekick'd been turned from a fish into a wide-eyed fat-lipped girl by a third-rate wizard. The leader, however, who'd come into La Boîte aux Mille Surprises first, she could've been off a shampoo advert. Pixie ears, pixie eyes, swelling cream T-shirt, liquorice miniskirt, leggings that looked sprayed on to her perfect legs and toffee hair I'd've given my soul to bury myself in. (Girls' curves never used to yank me hard like this.) Even Pixie's fury sunflower bag was from a world where nothing ugly's allowed. Not gawping at her was impossible, so I went and sat in the tiny office. Mum came in a minute later to phone Yasmin Morton-Bagot, leaving Agnes on the till. A pipeline of vision went through the door crack, between two giant candles from Palermo and under an amber lampshade from Poland. By chance, Pixie's angelic bum hovered at the end of this pipeline. It stayed there while Acne and Codgirl got Agnes to get a Chinese scroll off the wall. Their voices were posh and horsey. I was still stroking Pixie's curves with my eyes. That's why I saw her fingers flicker behind the glass display, snatch the opal earrings and slip them into her sunflower bag.

Trouble, shouts, threats, police, whimpered Maggot. Stammering in court when you're called to give evidence. And are you sure you just saw what you thought you saw?

I hissed, 'Mum!'

Mum asked me just the once. ‘Are you sure?’ I nodded. Mum told Yasmin Morton-Bagot she’d call her back, hung up and got out a Polaroid Instamatic. ‘Can you shoot them when I say so?’ I nodded. ‘Good lad.’

Mum walked to the front of the shop and quietly locked the door. Agnes noticed and the atmosphere in the shop went tense and dark, like before a scrap at school. Pixie gave a sign to her sidekicks it was time to leave.

Pixie’s voice was brassy. ‘The door’s locked!’

‘I’m perfectly aware the door is locked. I just locked it.’

‘Well, you can unlock it again, can’t you?’

‘Well,’ Mum jangled her keys, ‘it’s like this. A thief has just put a pair of rather valuable Australian opals in her bag. Obviously, I need to protect my stock. The thief wants to escape with her stolen goods. So we have an impasse. What would you do, if you were in my position?’

Acne and Codgirl were already on the verge of tears.

‘What I wouldn’t do,’ Pixie sounded dangerous now, ‘if I were a shop assistant, is throw around totally pathetic accusations.’

‘So you won’t mind proving my accusations are totally pathetic by emptying your bag. Imagine how stupid this shop assistant will look when there are no earrings in it!’

For one awful second I thought Pixie’d somehow put the jewellery back.

‘I’m not going to let you or anyone rifle through my bag.’

Pixie was tough. This battle could still go either way.

‘Do your parents know you’re thieves?’ Mum turned on Acne and Codgirl. ‘How are they going to react when the police call?’

Acne and Codgirl even smelt guilty.

‘We were going to pay.’ Pixie made her first mistake.

‘Pay for what?’ Mum smiled, sort of creepily.

‘Unless you catch us walking out of your shop, you can’t do a thing! My father has an excellent solicitor.’

‘Does he? So do I,’ Mum replied, brightly. ‘I have two witnesses who saw you trying to leave.’

Pixie marched up to Mum and I thought she was going to hit her. ‘GIVE ME THE KEY OR YOU’LL REGRET IT!’

‘Haven’t you realized by now’ (I had no idea Mum could be so bulletproof) ‘you’re not intimidating me in the least?’

‘Please,’ tears shone in Acne’s face, ‘please – I—’

‘In that case,’ Pixie snapped, ‘suppose I just pick up one of your crappy statues and smash my way out of this—’

Mum nodded at me, Now.

The flash made all three girls jump.

The photo grunted out of the Polaroid. I waved it by its corner to dry it for a second or two. Then I took another photo for good measure.

‘What,’ Pixie was beginning to crumble, ‘does he think he’s doing?’

‘Next week,’ Mum said, ‘I shall visit every school in town – with a police officer, and these photographs – starting with Cheltenham Girls’ College.’ Codgirl let out a flutter of despair. ‘Headmistresses are always so cooperative. They’d rather expel a bad apple or two than risk their school getting into the newspapers for the wrong reasons. Who can blame them?’

‘Ophelia.’ Acne’s voice was as quiet as a kitten’s. ‘Let’s just—’

“‘Ophelia’!” Mum was enjoying this. ‘You don’t get many Ophelias to the pound.’

Pixie-Ophelia’s options were closing in.

‘Or,’ Mum jangled her keys, ‘turn out your bags and pockets and return my stock. Tell me your names, your schools, your addresses and your telephone numbers. Yes, you will be in trouble. Yes, I will contact your schools. But no, I won’t press charges or involve the police.’

The three girls stared at the floor.

‘But you have to choose now.’

Nobody moved.

‘As you wish. Agnes, telephone PC Morton, please. Tell him to make space in his cells for three shoplifters.’

Acne put a Tibetan amulet on the counter and tears streamed down her pitted, powdery cheeks. ‘I’ve never done this before...’

‘Choose better friends.’ Mum looked at Codgirl.

Codgirl’s hand trembled as she produced a Danish paperweight.

‘Didn’t Shakespeare’s Ophelia,’ Mum turned to the real one, ‘come to a mad, bad end?’

‘Wow,’ me and Mum hurried along Regent’s Arcade so we’d get to the cinema before Chariots of Fire began, ‘you handled those girls amazingly.’

‘Fancy.’ Mum’s shoes smacked the shiny marble. Take that! Take That! Take that! ‘An old dear like me being able to handle three spoilt Pollyannas “amazingly”.’ (Mum was dead chuffed, really.) ‘You spotted them in the first place, Jason. Old Eagle-eyes. If I was a sheriff, I’d pay you a reward.’

‘Popcorn and 7-Up please.’

‘Oh, I think we can manage that.’

People’re a nestful of needs. Dull needs, sharp needs, bottomless-pit needs, flash-in-the-pan needs, needs for things you can’t hold, needs for things you can. Adverts know this. Shops know this. Specially in arcades, shops’re deafening. I’ve got what you want! I’ve got what you want! I’ve got what you want! But walking down Regent’s Arcade, I noticed a new need that’s normally so close up you never know it’s there. You and your mum need to like each other. Not love, but like.

‘This,’ Mum sighed and fished out her sunglasses, ‘is wonderful.’

The queue for Chariots of Fire snaked down the cinema steps and along the street for eight or ten shops. The film started in thirteen minutes. Ninety or a hundred people were ahead of us. Kids, mostly, in twos, threes and fours. A few old-age pensioners too. A few couples. The only boy queuing with his mother was me. Wished it wasn’t so obvious I was with her.

‘Jason, don’t tell me you need the loo after all?’

A fat prat with floppy eyelids turned round and smirked.

I half-snapped at Mum, ‘No!’

(Thank God nobody knows me in Cheltenham. Two years ago Ross Wilcox and Gray Drake saw Floyd Chaceley queuing outside Malvern pictures for Gregory’s Girl with his mum. They’re still ripping the piss out of him.)

‘Don’t adopt that tone of voice with me! I told you to go at the shop!’

Good moods’re as fragile as eggs. ‘But I don’t.’

A sick bus growled past and made the air taste of pencils.

‘If you’re ashamed to be seen with me, just say so.’ (Mum and Julia often hit bull’s-eyes even I hadn’t spotted.) ‘We can save ourselves a lot of bother.’

‘No!’ It’s not ‘ashamed’. Well, it is sort of. But not ’cause Mum’s Mum, only ’cause Mum’s a mum. Now I’m ashamed that I’m ashamed. ‘No.’

Bad moods’re as fragile as bricks.

That floppy-eyelidded fat prat in front was loving this.

Miserably, I took off my jumper and knotted its arms round my waist. The queue shuffled us forward to outside a travel agent's. A girl Julia's age sat behind a desk. Lack of sunshine'd made her spotty and pale. So this is what O-levels earn you. A poster Blu-Tack'd on the window roared, WIN THE HOLIDAY OF A LIFETIME WITH E-ZEE TRAVEL! Mum the Delighted, Dad the Smiley Provider, Glamourpuss Big Sister and Tufty Brother. In front of Ayers Rock, the Taj Mahal, Disneyland Florida. 'Next summer,' I asked Mum, 'will we all go on holiday again?'

'Let's just,' Mum's sunglasses hid her eyes, 'wait and see.'

Unborn Twin goaded me on. 'Wait and see what?'

'A year's a long way off. Julia's talking about doing a Euro Rail, or whatever they're called.'

'Interrail.'

'How about your school skiing trip? With your friends?' (Mum hasn't noticed I'm not popular any more.) 'Julia had a lovely time in West Germany on that exchange a few years ago.'

'Ülrike the Shrieker and Hans the Hands didn't sound lovely to me.'

'Your sister was exaggerating, Jason, I'm sure.'

'Why don't just you, Dad and me go somewhere? Lyme Regis's nice.'

'I...' Mum sighed. '...I don't know if this year's problems with the time off and whatnot that Dad and I had will be better next year. Let's just wait and see how things turn out.'

'But Dean Moran's mum works in an old folks' home and his dad's a postman but they always manage to—'

'Bully for Mr and Mrs Moran,' Mum used the voice that means you're talking too loud, 'but not all jobs are as flexible, Jason.'

'But—'

‘Enough, Jason!’

The cinema man has appeared. He judges who'll get in and who'll be told, 'You may as well go home.' The Saved and the Rejects. The cinema man's lips twitch numbers as he paces down the pavement, slow as a coffin-bearer. His Biro scratches his clipboard. Queueurs grin with relief when he passes, peering back to see who he'll cast off as Rejects. The Saved're such smug bastards. They've got a seat in the colourful kingdom in the dark. Even if it's where the screen's too close up, Chariots of Fire'll run for them. Twenty people're left between the cinema man and us. Please, let your feet come just a few extra paces along the pavement, just a few more, come on, just a few more...

Please.

Maggot

'Jason Taylor,' Ross Wilcox's breath smelt like a bag of ham, 'goes to the pictures with Mummy!' A moment ago Mark Badbury'd been talking to me about how to win at Pacman. Now, this. I'd already missed my chance to deny it. 'We seen yer! In Cheltenham! Queueing with yer mummy!'

Traffic and time in the corridor'd slowed down.

Stupidly, I tried to downgrade his attack by smiling.

'What're yer smiling about, yer oily fuckin' maggot? Touch yer mummy up in the back row, did yer?' Wilcox gave my tie a vicious yank. Just because. 'Stick yer tongue in, did yer?' He pinged my nose. Just because.

'Taylor!' Gary Drake hunts with his cousin. 'That's disgusting!'

Neal Brose looked at me like you'd look at a dog taken to the vet's to be put down. Pity, but contempt, too, that it'd allowed itself to get so weak.

'Give Mummy a Frenchie, did yer?' Ant Little is Wilcox's new servant.

Wayne Nashend's an older one. 'Slip yer finger in, did yer?'

Spectators voted with their grins.

'Answer us, then.' Wilcox has a habit of holding the tip of his tongue between his teeth. (That same tongue that tasted every nook of Dawn Madden.) 'Or c-c-can't y-y-yer get the w-w-words out, yer st-st-stuttery bugger?'

That shot this attack into a new dimension. A hollow pit yawned where my answer should've been.

'Ross!' Darren Croome hissed. 'Flanagan's coming!'

Wilcox ground his foot on my shoe like he was putting out a cigarette. 'Dicksquirt stammerstuttery mammyshagging arse-maggot.'

Mr Flanagan the deputy head breezed by, flushing the 3GL kids towards the geography room. Wilcox, Ant Little and Wayne Nashend went but my popularity was left dying in its final spasms. Mark Badbury was going over our maths homework with Colin Pole. I didn't approach anyone 'cause I knew they wouldn't talk to me. All I could do was stare out the window till Mr Inkberrow rolled up.

Mist's dulling the gold leaves and browning the reds.

Double maths is ninety minutes of pure boredom on the best of days and today was the worst of the worst. Wished I hadn't nagged Mum to take me to Chariots of Fire. Wished I'd just gone alone and paid for myself.

Wilcox would've found some reason to put the boot in, mind. He hates me. Dogs hate foxes. Nazis hate Jews. Hate doesn't need a why. Who or even what is ample. This is what I was thinking when Mr Inkberrow whacked my desk with his metre-rule. I jumped in my seat and cracked my knee-cap on my desk. Obviously I'd zoned out of the lesson again.

'In need of a little focusing, Taylor, hmm?'

'Uh...I don't know, sir.'

'A quick head-to-head to sharpen your brain, Taylor. You versus Pike.'

I silently groaned. Head-to-head's where Kid A solves a sum on the left of the blackboard while Kid B solves the same sum on the right, like a race. Clive Pike's 3KM's mathematical brainbox, so I didn't stand a chance. Which was part of the fun. Even as we wrote down the dictated equation, my chalk snapped.

Half the class giggled, including some girls.

Leon Cutler muttered, 'What a loser.'

It's one thing Ross Wilcox giving you a going over in public. Ross Wilcox's doing that to loads of kids this term. But if a Mr Average like Leon Cutler slags you off and doesn't even care that you can hear, your credibility is bloody bankrupt.

'Ready,' called out Mr Inkberrow from the back, 'set – go!'

Clive Pike's chalk went smartly to work.

I wasn't going to solve this equation and it knew it. I don't even know what equations're for.

'Sir!' called out Gary Drake. 'Taylor's spying on Pike. That's not very sporting, sir, is it?'

'I d—' (Hangman put the boot in, too, on 'didn't'). 'Isn't true, sir.'

Mr Inkberrow just rubbed his glasses with a handkerchief.

Tasmin Murrell risked a snickerycockery 'Naughty naughty, Taylor!' Tasmin Murrell! A bloody girl.

'Such a sense of fair play, Gary Drake,' remarked Mr Ink berrow. 'You should consider law enforcement as a career option, hmm?'

'Thanks, sir. Might just do that.'

I'd made only a few half-hearted scratches with my chalk. Clive Pike stood back from the blackboard.

Mr Inkberrow let some moments pass. 'Excellent, Pike. Sit down.'

My answer'd died in the second line of xs and ys and squareds.

Muffled giggles began breaking out.

'Silence, 3KM! I see nothing amusing about spending a week of my life teaching anyone quadratic equations when the result is this...dog's dinner. Everyone, page eighteen. Sit down, Taylor. Let us see if your woeful ignorance is shared by the rest of the form.'

'Spazzo,' hissed Gary Drake, as I stepped over the foot he'd stuck out to trip me. 'Maggot.'

Carl Norrest didn't say a word when I sat back down at our desk. He knows how it feels. But I knew this was just the beginning. I've memorized our new Third-year timetable and I knew what was coming up in the third and fourth periods.

Mr Carver our usual PE teacher'd taken the fifth-year rugby team to Malvern Boys' College so this student teacher, Mr McNamara, was taking us juniors on his own. This was good news 'cause if Carver scents you're unpopular, he joins in. Like the showers after winter football when Carver sits on the gym horse calling out, 'Off with your cacks, Floyd Chaceley, or are we deformed?' and 'Backs to the wall, lads, Nicholas Briar's coming through!' Of course, most of us laughed like this was the funniest thing on earth.

The bad news was, my form (3KM) and Ross Wilcox's form (3GL) do PE together and Mr McNamara can't discipline a class of boys to save his life. Or mine.

The changing room stinks of armpits and soil. It's divided into zones. The hard kids' zone's farthest from the door. The lepers' zone's nearest the door. Everyone else's in between. Normally that's me, but today all the pegs there'd gone. The traditional lepers, Carl Norrest, Floyd Chaceley and Nicholas Briar, acted like I'm one of them now and made space. Gary Drake, Neal Brose and Wilcox's lot were busy with a bumflick battle so I changed quickly and hurried out into the cold morning. Mr McNamara got us doing warm-up exercises before starting us on laps. I jogged at a careful pace that kept Ross Wilcox's lot on the far side of the track from me.

Autumn's turning miserable, rotting and foggy. The next field along from our sports field was burnt flapjack brown. The field after that was the colour paintbrush water goes. The Malvern Hills were rubbed out by the season. Gilbert Swinyard says our school and the Maze Prison were built by the same architect. The Maze Prison's in Northern Ireland, where Bobby Sands the IRA hunger striker died last year.

On days like today, I believe Gilbert Swinyard.

‘So you reckon you’ve got what it takes to be centre-forward for Liverpool? For Man U? For England?’ Mr McNamara paced to and fro in his black-and-orange Wolverhampton Wanderers tracksuit. ‘So you reckon you’ve got the guts? The grit?’ Mr McNamara’s Kevin Keegan perm bounced. ‘Clueless! Look at you! Want to know what Loughborough University taught me about sweat and success? Well, I’m gonna tell you anyway! Success in sport – and in life, lads, yeah, in life – equals SWEAT! Sweat and success’ (Darren Croome belted out a loud fart) ‘equals success and sweat! So when you get out there on that pitch today, lads, show me some sweat! I wanna see three hundred per cent sweat! We’re not gonna nancy about choosing teams today! It’s 3KM stick 3GL! Brain versus brawn! Real men can go up front, ponces in midfield, cripples in defence, nutters in goal – only joking, I don’t think! Move it!’ Mr McNamara blasted his whistle. ‘Come on, lads, keep it flowing!’

Maybe the sabotage’d been planned in advance, or maybe it just happened. Once you’re a leper you’re not let in on things. But pretty soon, I realized 3KM kids and 3GL kids were switching teams at random. Paul White (3GL) banged a long-distance shot at his own goal. Gavin Coley did a spectacular dive, the wrong way. When Ross Wilcox fouled Oswald Wyre (his team) in our penalty area, it was Neal Brose (our team) who took it and scored. Mr McNamara must’ve guessed litres of piss was being taken. Perhaps he didn’t want to turn his first solo lesson into a bollocking parade.

Then the fouling began.

Wayne Nashend and Christopher Twyford pogoed on to each of Carl Norrest’s shoulders. Carl Norrest cried out as he buckled under their weight. ‘Sir!’ Wayne Nashend sprang up first. ‘Norrest took my legs from under me! Red card, sir!’

McNamara looked at trampled, muddy Carl Norrest. ‘Keep it flowing.’

I spent the game near enough to the ball to not get done for malingering, but far enough away to avoid having to touch it. I heard the feet come

thudding up but before I'd time to turn, a rugby tackle knocked me flat. My face was smeared into the mud.

'Eat as much as yer want, Taylor!' Ross Wilcox, sure enough.

'Maggots love this stuff!' Gary Drake, sure enough.

I tried to roll over but they had all their weight on my back.

'Oy!' McNamara's whistle blew. 'You!'

They got off me. I got to my feet, trembling with victimhood.

Ross Wilcox prodded his heart. 'Me, sir?'

'Both of you!' McNamara pounded up. (Everyone'd abandoned the football to watch this new sport.) 'What in hell d'you think you're playing at?'

'Bit of a late tackle, sir.' Gary Drake smiled. 'I admit.'

'The ball was up the other end!'

'Honest, sir,' said Ross Wilcox. 'I thought he had the ball. Blind as a bat without my glasses.'

(Wilcox doesn't wear glasses.)

'So you knocked this boy to the ground with a rugby tackle?'

'I thought rugby's what we're playing, sir.'

(The spectators cackled.)

'Oh, a comedian, are we?'

'No, sir! Now I've remembered it's football. But when I made the tackle, I thought it was rugby.'

‘Me too.’ Gary Drake began jogging on the spot like a Sport Billy. ‘Too much competitive spirit, sir. Clean forgot. Sweat equals success.’

‘Right! Run to the bridge, the pair of you, to jog your memories!’

‘He made us do it, sir.’ Ross Wilcox pointed at Darren Croome. ‘If you don’t punish him too you’re letting the ringleader off scot-free.’

Bone-thick Darren Croome gooned back.

‘All three of you!’ Mr McNamara’s inexperience showed itself again. ‘The bridge and back! Go! And who told the rest of you the game’s over? Keep it flowing!’

The bridge's just a footbridge that connects the far end of the school playing field to a country lane that goes down to Upton upon Severn. 'Run to the bridge!' is a standard Mr Carver punishment. There's a clear view so the teacher can check they've run all the way. Mr McNamara got back to refereeing so he didn't see Gary Drake, Ross Wilcox and Darren Croome run to the bridge, then, instead of running back, disappear over it.

Ace. Skiving off a lesson's a serious enough offence to be sent to Mr Nixon. If Mr Nixon got involved, they'd forget about me for the day.

Without Gary Drake and Ross Wilcox organizing the sabotage, the football match turned normal. 3GL scored six goals, 3KM four.

Only as we were whacking the mud off our boots by the huts where the sports gear's kept did Mr McNamara remember the three boys he'd sent to the bridge over forty minutes earlier. 'Where in blazes did those three clowns get to?'

I kept my mouth shut.

‘Where in blazes did you three clowns get to?’

Wilcox, Drake and Croome’d got back, reeking of fags and Polo mints. They looked at Mr McNamara, then each other, in fake confusion. Gary Drake answered, ‘The bridge, sir. Like you told us.’

‘You were away for three quarters of an hour!’

‘Twenty to get there, sir,’ said Ross Wilcox. ‘Twenty to get back.’

‘Do you boys think I’m a complete idiot?’

‘Of course not, sir!’ Ross Wilcox looked hurt. ‘You’re a PE teacher.’

‘And you went to Loughborough University,’ Gary Drake added. ‘“England’s premier sporting academy bar none”.’

‘You boys have no inkling of the trouble you’re in!’ Anger made Mr McNamara’s eyes brighter and his face darker. ‘You can’t leave school premises without permission just because the fancy takes you!’

‘But, sir,’ Gary Drake said, puzzled. ‘You told us to.’

‘I did no such thing!’

‘You told us run to the bridge and back. So we ran to the bridge over the River Severn. Down in Upton. That’s what you said.’

‘Upton? You ran to the river? At Upton?’ (Mr McNamara was seeing the front page of the Malvern Gazetteer. STUDENT TEACHER SENDS 3 BOYS TO WATERY DEATHS.) ‘The footbridge, I meant, you cretins! By the tennis courts! Why would I send you off to Upton? Unsupervised?’

Ross Wilcox kept a straight face. ‘Sweat equals success, sir.’

Mr McNamara'd settled for a draw in return for the last word. 'You boys have got a lot of problems and the biggest one's me!' After he'd retreated into Mr Carver's cubby-hole, Ross Wilcox and Gary Drake got busy whispering round the hard kids and the in-between kids. A minute later Wilcox called, 'A-one, a-two, a-one, two, three, four,' and everyone 'cept us lepers began singing to the tune of 'John Brown's Body':

Mr McNamara likes to take it up his arse,

Mr McNamara likes to take it up his arse,

Mr McNamara likes to take it up his arse,

And he wants to shove his up yours too – too – too!

Glory, glory McNamaara!

He poked his dong up Mr Caaarver!

He even poked it up his faaather!

Now he wants to poke it up yours too – too – too!

The song had got louder by its third encore. Perhaps kids thought, If I chicken out of this, I'll be the next Jason Taylor. Or perhaps mass gang-ups just have a will of their own that swallows up resistance. Maybe gang-ups're as old as hunters in caves. Gang-ups need blood as fuel.

The changing-room door slammed open.

The song instantly insisted it'd never existed.

The door bounced off the rubber door-stop on the wall and hit Mr McNamara in the face.

Forty-plus boys nervously corking in laughter is still quite loud.

‘I’d call you a pack of pigs,’ Mr McNamara shrieked, ‘but that’d be an insult to farmyard animals!’

‘Oooooooooo!’ vibrated from the walls.

Some fury is scary, some fury is ridiculous.

I felt sorry for Mr McNamara. He’s me, in a way.

‘Which of you’ – McNamara bit back the words that’d lose him his job – ‘toe-rags have the guts to insult me face to face? Right now?’

Long, mocking, silent seconds.

‘Go on! Sing it. Go on. SING IT!’ That shout must’ve torn his throat. Sure there was anger in it, but I recognized despair, too. Forty more years of this. McNamara glared round his tormentors, searching for a new strategy. ‘You!’

To my utter horror ‘You!’ was Me.

McNamara must’ve recognized me as the kid trodden into the mud. He figured I’d be the likeliest to grass. ‘Names.’

I shrank as the Devil turned eighty eyes on me.

There’s this iron rule. It says, You don’t get people into trouble by naming them, even if they deserve it. Teachers don’t understand this rule.

McNamara folded his arms. ‘I’m waiting.’

My voice was a tiny spider’s. ‘I didn’t see, sir.’

‘I said, “Names”!’ McNamara’s fingers’d balled into a fist and his arm was twitching. He was on the very edge of belting me one. But then all light drained from the room, like a solar eclipse.

Mr Nixon, our headmaster, materialized in the doorway.

‘Mr McNamara, is this child your main offender, your chief suspect, or a recalcitrant informer?’

(In ten seconds I’d be sandwich spread or relatively free.)

‘He,’ Mr McNamara swallowed hard, not sure if his teaching career was minutes away from amputation, ‘says he “didn’t see”, Headmaster.’

‘There are none so blind, Mr McNamara.’ Mr Nixon advanced a few steps, hands hidden behind his back. Boys shrank against the benches. ‘One minute ago I was speaking on the telephone to a colleague in Droitwich. Abruptly, I was obliged to apologize, and terminate the conversation. Now. Who can guess the reason?’ (Every kid in the room stared very hard at the dirty floor. Even Mr McNamara. Mr Nixon’s stare’d’ve vaporized you if you met it.) ‘I ended my conversation owing to the infantile braying coming from this room. Literally, I could no longer hear myself think. Now. I am not concerned about the identity of the ringleader. I do not care who roared, who hummed, who remained mute. What I care about is that Mr McNamara, a guest in our school, will report to his peers – with just cause – that I am the headmaster of a zoo of hooligans. For this affront to my reputation, I shall punish every one of you.’ Mr Nixon lifted his chin one quarter-inch. We flinched. “Please, Mr Nixon! I didn’t join in! It’s not fair if you punish me!” He dared anyone to agree but nobody was stupid enough. ‘Oh, but I am not paid my stratospheric salary to be fair. I am paid my stratospheric salary to uphold standards. Standards which you,’ he knitted his hands together and cracked the knuckles, sickeningly, ‘just trampled into the dirt. In a more enlightened age, a sound thrashing would have taught you a sense of decorum. But, as our masters at Westminster have deprived us of this tool, other more onerous techniques must be found.’ Mr Nixon reached the door. ‘The Old Gym. A quarter past twelve. Latecomers will receive a week’s detention. Absentees will be expelled. That is all.’

Old school dinners've been replaced this September by a cafeteria. A sign saying RITZ CAFETERIA OPERATED BY KWALITY KWISINE is bolted over the dining room door, though the reek of vinegar and frying hits you in the cloakrooms. Under the writing's a smiley pig in a chef's hat carrying a platter of sausages. The menu's chips, beans, hamburgers, sausages and fried egg. Pudding's ice cream with tinned pears or ice cream with tinned peaches. To drink there's fizzless Pepsi, sicky orange or warmish water. Last week Clive Pike found half a millipede in his hamburger, still wriggling. Even worse, he never found the other half.

As I queued up, people kept glancing at me. A pair of first-years weren't trying too hard not to laugh. Everyone's heard it's Get Taylor Day. Even dinner ladies witched at me from behind the shiny counters. Something was going on. I didn't know what till I sat down with my tray next to Dean Moran on the lepers' table.

'Um...someone's put some stickers on your back, Jace.'

As I took off my blazer an earthquake of laughter rocked the Ritz Cafeteria. Ten sticky labels'd been put on my back. On each was written MAGGOT in a different pen by a different hand. I just stopped myself running out. That'd make their victory even more perfect. As the earthquake calmed down, I peeled off the stickers and tore them to shreds under the table.

'Ignore the wankers,' Dean Moran told me. A fat chip slapped his cheek. 'Funny!' he shouted in the direction it'd flown from.

'Yeah,' Ant Little called from Wilcox's table, 'we thought so.' Three or four more were lobbed over. Miss Ronkswood came into the hall, stopping the chip bombardment.

'Hey...' Unlike me, Dean Moran's able to ignore stuff. 'Heard the news?'

Miserably, I picked specks of dried-on food off my fork. 'What?'

'Debby Crombie.'

‘What about Debby Crombie?’

‘She’s only in the club, ain’t she?’

‘Netball?’

‘The club!’ Dean hissed. ‘Preggers!’

‘Pregnant? Debby Crombie? A baby?’

‘Keep yer voice down! Looks that way. Tracy Swinyard’s best mates with the secretary at Upton doctors. They went on the piss at the Black Swan two nights ago. After a drink or five she told Tracy Swinyard to cross her heart and hope to die, and told her. Tracy Swinyard told my sister. Kelly told me at breakfast this morning. Made me swear not to tell on our nan’s grave.’

(Moran’s nan’s grave’s littered with shredded oaths.)

‘Who’s the father?’

‘Don’t have to be Sherlock Holmes. Debby Crombie ain’t been out with no one since Tom Yew, has she?’

‘But Tom Yew was killed back in June.’

‘Aye, but he were in Black Swan Green in April, weren’t he? On leave. Must’ve pumped his tadpoles up her back then.’

‘So Debby Crombie’s baby’s dad’s dead, even before it’s born?’

‘Cryin’ shame or what? Isaac Pye said he’d get an abortion if he was her, but Dawn Madden’s mum said abortion’s murder. Anyhow, Debby Crombie told the doctor she’s havin’ the baby, no matter what. The Yews’ll help raise it, Kelly reckons. Bring Tom back to life, in a way, I s’pose.’

These jokes the world plays, they’re not funny at all.

I’ve never heard anything, said Unborn Twin, so hilarious.

I bolted my egg and chips to get to the Old Gym by 12.15.

Most of our school was built in the last thirty years, but one part's an old grammar school from Victorian times and the Old Gym's in that. It's not used much. Tiles get blown off on stormy days. One missed Lucy Sneads by inches last January, but no one's been killed yet. One first-year kid did die in the Old Gym, though. Bullied so badly, he hanged himself with his tie. Up where the gym ropes hang down. Pete Redmarley swears he saw the kid hanging there, one stormy afternoon, three years ago, not quite dead. The kid's head flip-flopped 'cause of his snapped neck and his feet spasmed, twenty feet off the ground. Pale as chalk, he was, 'cept for the red welt where his tie'd burnt. But his eyes were watching Pete Redmarley. Pete Redmarley never's set foot in the Old Gym since. Not once.

So anyway, our form and 3GL were waiting in the Quad. I'd sort of attached myself to Christopher Twyford, Neal Brose and David Ockeridge, talking about Dirty Harry. Dirty Harry was on TV on Saturday. There's this scene where Clint Eastwood doesn't know if he has a bullet left in his gun to shoot the baddie.

'Yeah,' I chipped in, 'that bit was epic.'

Christopher Twyford and David Ockeridge's stare said, Who gives a toss what you think?

'No one,' Neal Brose told me, 'says "epic" any more, Taylor.'

Mr Nixon, Mr Kempsey and Miss Glynnch walked across the Quad. A major bollocking was coming. Inside, seats'd been arranged in exam rows. 3KM sat on the left, 3GL on the right. ‘Does anyone,’ Mr Nixon began, ‘believe he shouldn’t be here?’ Our headmaster may as well’ve said, ‘Does anyone wish to shoot their own knee-caps?’ Nobody fell for it. Miss Glynnch spoke mainly to 3GL. ‘You’ve let your teachers down, you’ve let your school down, and you’ve let yourself down...’ Mr Kempsey did us after. ‘I do not recall, in twenty-six years of teaching, feeling this sickened. You have behaved like a pack of hooligans...’

This took till 12.30.

Grimy windows rectangled misty gloom.

The exact colour of boredom.

‘You shall remain in your seats,’ announced Mr Nixon, ‘until the one o’clock bell. You will not move. You will not speak. “But, sir! What if I need the lavatory?” Humiliate yourself, as you sought to humiliate a member of my staff. You will fetch a mop after the bell. Your detention shall be repeated every lunch-time this week.’ (Nobody dared groan.) “But, sir! What is the point of this static punishment?” The point is that the victimization of the few – or even the one – by the many has no place in our school.’

Our head then left. Mr Kempsey and Miss Glynnch had books to mark. Only their scratching pens, kids’ stomachs, flies entombed in the strip-lights and distant cries of free kids ruckled the silence. The unfriendly clock’s second hand shuddered, shuddered, shuddered, shuddered. That clock was more than likely the last thing in the world the kid who hanged himself saw.

Thanks to these detentions, Ross Wilcox won’t get me in the next few lunch-times. Any normal kid’d be nervous if they’d got two classes of boys sentenced to a week of detention. Might Mr Nixon be banking on us doing his job punishing the ringleaders ourselves? I sneaked a glance at Ross Wilcox.

Ross Wilcox must've been staring at me. He flashed me a fuck you V and mouthed, 'Maggot.'

“I got the conch—” Jack turned fiercely. “You shut up!” Shit. The word ‘circle’ was coming up. “Piggy wilted. Ralph took the conch from him and looked round the—” Desperately, I used the Trip Method, where you set up the stammer letter (‘s’) but sort of trip over it into the vowel to get the word out. ‘Sss-ircle of boys.’ Cased in sweat now, I glanced at Mr Monk, our student teacher for English. Miss Lippetts never makes me read aloud but Miss Lippetts’d gone to the staffroom. Obviously she hadn’t told Mr Monk about our arrangement.

‘Good.’ Patience strained Mr Monk’s voice. ‘Go on.’

“We’ve got to have special people for looking after the fire.” (S-consonant words’re easier than S-vowel words, I don’t know why.) “Any day there”, I swallowed, “there m-may be a ship out there” – he waved his arm at the taut wire of the horizon – “and if we have a signal going they’ll come and take us off.” (Hangman let me say ‘signal’ like a superior boxer lets the loser land a punch or two, for fun.) “And another thing. We ought to have more rules. Where the conch is, that’s a meeting. The sssame up here as down there.” They—’, Oh shit shit shit. Now I couldn’t say ‘assented’. Normally it’s only words beginning with S. ‘Erm...’

“Assented,” said Mr Monk, surprised a kid in the top form couldn’t read such a simple word.

I wasn’t stupid enough to try to repeat it, like Mr Monk expected. ‘Piggy opened his mouth to ssspeak, caught Jack’s eye and shut it again.’ There’s no way I was hiding my stammer now. Hangman knew he was on to a major victory. I’d just had to use the Punch Method again for ‘speak’. Using brute force to punch the word out’s a last resort ’cause your face goes spaz. And if Hangman punches back harder the word gets stuck and that’s when you turn into the classic stuttering flid. ‘Jack held out his hands for the conch and,’ suffocating in plastic, ‘sstood up, holding the delicate thing carefully in his’ – my earlobes buzzed with stress – ‘ssooty hands. “I agree with Ralph. We’ve got to have these rules and obey them. After all, we’re not – we’re not—” Sorry, sir...’ I had no choice. ‘What’s that word?’

“‘Savages’?”

‘Thanks, sir.’ (Wished I had the guts to press my two Ball Pentels against my eyeballs and head-slam the desk. Anything to get away.) “‘We’re English; and the English are best at everything.’ Er...“Sssso we’ve got to do the right things.””

Miss Lippetts walked in and saw what’d happened. ‘Thank you, Jason.’

No ‘How come he gets off so lightly?’ rippled round the class.

‘Please, miss?’ Gary Drake stuck up his hand.

‘Gary?’

‘This part’s brill. Honest, I’m on the edge of my seat. Mind if I read?’

‘Glad you’re enjoying it, Gary. Go ahead.’

Gary Drake cleared his throat. “‘Ralph – I’ll split up the choir – my hunters, that is – into groups, and we’ll be responsible for keeping the fire going—’” Gary Drake read with exaggerated polish, just to contrast with how he read next. ‘This generoossity brought a ssss-SSS-patter—’ (He got me. Boys were sniggering. Girls were looking round at me. My head burst into flames of shame.) ‘– of applause from the boys, s-s-s-s-s-s-s-so—’

‘Gary Drake!’

He was all innocent. ‘Miss?’

Kids turned round to stare at Gary Drake, then me. Is Taylor the School Stutterer going to cry? A label’d been stuck on me that I’ll never peel off.

‘Do you believe you are being amusing, Gary Drake?’

‘Sorry, miss.’ Gary Drake smiled without smiling. ‘Must’ve picked up a nasty stutter from somewhere...’

Christopher Twyford and Leon Cutler shook with stifled laughter.

‘You two can shut up!’ They did. Miss Lippetts’s no idiot. Sending Gary Drake to Mr Nixon’d’ve turned his joke into today’s main headline. If it isn’t already. ‘That is despicably, fatuously, ignorantly weak of you, Gary Drake.’ The rest of the words on page forty-one of Lord of the Flies swarmed off the page and buried my face in bees.

Seventh and eighth periods were music with Mr Kempsey, our form teacher. Alastair Nurton'd taken my usual seat next to Mark Badbury so without a word I sat with Carl Norrest, Lord of Lepers. Nicholas Briar and Floyd Chaceley've been lepers together so long they're almost married. Mr Kempsey was still furious with us for the McNamara affair. After we'd chanted, 'Good afternoon, Mr Kempsey,' he just wanged us our exercise books like Oddjob throwing his hat in Goldfinger. 'I quite fail to see what is "good" about this afternoon, when you have rubbished the founding principle of the comprehensive school. Namely, that the putative crème de la crème impart their enrichening essence to the milkier orders. Avril Bredon, distribute the textbooks. Chapter three. It is Ludwig van Beethoven's turn to be hanged, drawn and quartered.' (We don't actually make music in music. All we've done this term is copy out chunks from Lives of the Great Composers. While we're doing this, Mr Kempsey unlocks the record player and puts on an LP of that week's composer. The poshest voice on earth introduces that composer's greatest hits.) 'Remember,' warned Mr Kempsey, 'to rewrite the biography in your own words.' Teachers're always using that 'in your own words'. I hate that. Authors knit their sentences tight. It's their job. Why make us unpick them, just to put then back together more shonkily? How're you s'posed to say capelmeister if you can't say capelmeister?

Nobody messes about much in Mr Kempsey's class, but today the mood was like somebody'd died. The only minor distraction was Holly Deblin, the new girl, asking if she could go to the sickbay for a bit. Mr Kempsey just pointed at the door and mouthed, 'Go.' Third-year girls're allowed to go to the sickbay or toilets much more freely than boys. Duncan Priest says it's to do with periods. Periods're pretty mysterious. Girls don't talk about them when boys're around. Boys don't joke about them much, in case we give away how little we know.

Beethoven going deaf was the high point of his chapter in Lives of the Great Composers. Composers spent half their lives walking across Germany to work for different archbishops and archdukes. The other half must've been lost in church. (Bach's choirboys used his original

manuscripts to wrap their sandwiches in for years after he'd died. That's the only other thing I've learnt in music this term.) I polished Beethoven off in forty minutes, long before the rest of the class.

Moonlight Sonata, the poshest voice on earth told us, is one of the best-loved pieces in any pianist's repertoire. Composed in 1782, the sonata evokes the moon over calm, peaceful waters after the passing of a storm.

A poem nagged as moonlight Sonata played. Its title's 'Souvenirs'. Wished I could've netted the lines in my rough book, but I daredn't, not in class, not on a day like today. (And now it's all gone 'cept for 'Sunlight on waves, drowsy tinsel'. Don't write it down and you're doomed.)

'Jason Taylor.' Mr Kempsey'd noticed my attention'd left the textbook.
'An errand for you.'

School corridors're sort of sinister during classtime. The noisiest spaces're now the silentest. Like a neutron bomb's vaporized human life but left all the buildings standing. These drowned voices you hear aren't coming from classrooms, but through the partitions between life and death. The shortest route to the staffroom was the Quad, but I took the longer way, via the Old Gym. Teachers' errands're in-between times where no one can hassle you, like Free Parking in Monopoly. I wanted to spin this space out. My feet clomped over the same worn boards boys did somersaults on before they went off to the First World War to be gassed. Stacked chairs block off one wall of the Old Gym, but the other wall's got a wooden frame you can climb. For some reason, I wanted to peer out through the window at the top. It was a minor risk. If I heard footsteps I'd just jump down.

Once you're up there, mind, it's higher than it looks.

Years of muck'd greyed the glass.

The afternoon'd turned to heavy grey.

Too heavy and too grey to not turn into rain. Moonlight Sonata orbited out past the tenth planet. Rooks huddled on a drainpipe, watching the school buses lumber into the big front yard. Bolshy, bored and bargey, those rooks, like the Upton Punks hanging out by their war memorial.

Once a Maggot, mocked Unborn Twin, always a Maggot.

Points behind my eyes ached with the coming rain.

Friday'd come round, sure. But the moment I get home, the weekend'll begin to die and Monday'll creep nearer, minute by minute. Then it'll be back to five more days like today, worse than today, far worse than today.

Hang yourself.

'Lucky for you,' a girl's voice said, and I nearly fell fifteen feet to a nest of fractured bones, 'I'm not a teacher on patrol, Taylor.'

I peered down at Holly Deblin peering up. ‘S’pose so.’

‘What’re you doing out of class?’

‘Kempsey sent me to get his whistle.’ I clambered down. Holly Deblin’s only a girl but she’s as tall as me. She throws the javelin farther than anyone. ‘He’s doing the bus queues today. Are you feeling better?’

‘Just needed to lie down for a bit. How about you? Giving you a hard time, aren’t they? Wilcox, Drake and Brose and them.’

No point denying it, but admitting it made it realer.

‘They’re dickheads, Taylor.’

Darkness in the Old Gym smoothed away Holly Deblin’s edges.

‘Yeah.’ They are dickheads, but how does that help me?

Was it then that I heard the first tappings of rain?

‘You’re not a maggot. Don’t let dickheads decide what you are.’

Past the clock where bad kids're made to stand, past the secretary's office where form captains fetch the registers, past the storeroom, a long passageway leads to the staffroom. My footsteps got slower as I got nearer. Its steel door was half open today. Low chairs, I saw. Mr Whitlock's black wellingtons. Cigarette smoke billowed out like fog in Jack the Ripper's London. But just this side of the door, there's a hive of cubby-holes where the more important teachers've got their own desks.

'Yes?' Mr Dunwoody blinked at me, dragonishly. A going-brown chrysanthemum leant over his shoulder. The art teacher's scarlet book was called *Story of the Eye* by Georges Bataille. 'As the title suggests,' Mr Dunwoody saw the book'd caught my attention, 'it's about the history of opticians. What are you about?'

'Mr Kempsey asked me to come and get his whistle, sir.'

'As in, "Whistle, and I'll come to you, my lad"?"

'I s'pose so, sir. He told me it's on his desk. On a paper of interest.'

'Or perhaps,' Mr Dunwoody stuck a Vick's nasal inhaler up his large red nose and took an almighty sniff, 'Mr Kempsey's getting out of teaching while his ticker is not yet dicky. Off to Snowdonia, to herd sheep? With Shep, his border collie? "Oh Give Me a Cot in the Land of the Mountains"? Could this be why he sent you for his whistle?'

'I think he's just doing the bus queues, sir.'

'End cell. Under the tender gaze of the Holy Lamb.' Mr Dunwoody got back to *Story of the Eye* without another word.

I walked down the empty hive. Desks come to resemble their owners, the way dogs do. Mr Inkberrow's desk's all neat stacks and piles. Mr Whitlock's is grubby with seed-trays and copies of *Sporting Life*. Mr Kempsey's cubby-hole has a leather chair, an anglepoise reading lamp like my dad's and a picture of Jesus holding a lantern by an ivy door. On his

desk was Plain Prayers for a Complicated World, Roget's Thesaurus (Dean Moran's dad calls it 'Roger's Brontosaurus'), Delius: As I knew him. Mr Kempsey's whistle was exactly where he'd told me. Under the whistle was a thin stack of Xeroxes of Xeroxes. I folded the top Xerox up and slipped it into my blazer pocket. Just because.



'Hunting for a needle in the ocean?' Mr Dunwoody's head appeared round his partition. 'As the Asiatics might say? In lieu of a haystack?'

I thought he'd seen me nick the sheet. 'Sir?'

'Pearls before swine? Or a whistle on a desk?'

I dangled the whistle at Mr Dunwoody. 'Just found it, sir...'

'Wherefore dalliest thou? With the speed of a wingèd monkey, convey it presently to its rightful owner. Huzzah!'

First-years were playing conkers in the queue for the Black Swan Green bus. In Miss Throckmorton's I was skill at conkers. Us third-years can't play conkers, though, 'cause it's too gay. It's maimball or nothing. But at least the conkers was something to watch. Wilcox'd made it risky even to talk to Jason Maggot, School Stutterkid. After Mr Kempsey'd herded the Birtsmorton lot on to their bus, he blew his whistle for the Black Swan Green kids. I wonder if he meant for me to take that sheet. When you decide Mr Kempsey's all right, he acts like a prat. When you decide Mr Kempsey's a prat, he acts all right.

Three rows from the front's too girly a seat for a third-year boy, but sitting near Wilcox's squad at the back'd've been asking for it. Middle-ranking kids trooped past the spare seat next to me. Robin South, Gavin Coley, Lee Biggs didn't even look at me. Oswald Wyre shot a 'Maggot!' at me. Across the playground a bunch of kids by the bike sheds'd turned to puppet shadows in the mist.

'Christ!' Dean Moran sat by me. 'What a day!'

'All right, Dean.' I felt miserable I felt so grateful.

'Tell yer what, Jace, that Murcot's a bloody nutter! In woodwork just now, right, a plane flew over and what does Murcot yell at the top of his lungs? "Hit the deck, boys! It's the goddam Jerries!" Honest to God, we all had to get down on our hands and knees! D'yer reckon he's going senile?'

'Could be.'

Norman Bates the driver started the engine and our bus moved off. Dawn Madden, Andrea Bozard and some other girls started singing 'The Lion Sleeps Tonight'. By the time the bus got to Welland Cross, fog was closing in thick.

'I was going to invite yer over this Saturday,' said Moran. 'Dad got a video recorder off this bloke in a pub in Tewkesbury.'

Despite my problems, I was impressed. ‘VHS or Betamax?’

‘Betamax, of course! VHS’s going extinct. Problem is, when we got the video out of its box yesterday, half its insides was missing.’

‘What did your dad do?’

‘Drove straight over to Tewkesbury to have it out with the bloke who’d sold it him. Problem is, the man’d vanished.’

‘Could anyone at the pub help?’

‘No. The pub’d vanished an’ all.’

‘Vanished? How can a pub vanish?’

‘Sign in the window. “We have ceased trading”. Padlocks on the doors and windows. FOR SALE sign. That’s how a pub vanishes.’

‘Bloody hell.’

Some trailers were parked in the Danemoor Farm lay-by, despite the hill of gravel left there to ward off gypsies. They hadn’t been there this morning. But this morning belonged to a different age.

‘Come over on Saturday anyway, if yer want. Mum’ll cook yer lunch. It’ll be a right laugh.’

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday had to be got through first.
‘Thanks.’

Ross Wilcox and his lot'd streamed off the bus first without even a glance at me. I crossed the village green thinking the worst of this turd of a day was over.

‘Where d’you think you’re going, Maggot?’ Ross Wilcox, under the oak tree with Gary Drake, Ant Little, Wayne Nashend and Darren Croome. They’d’ve loved me to make a run for it. I didn’t. Planet Earth’d shrunk to a bubble five paces wide.

‘Home,’ I said.

Wilcox flobbed. ‘Ain’t yer go-go-going to t-t-talk to us?’

‘No thanks.’

‘Well, yer ain’t goin’ to yer poncy fuckin’ home down poncy fuckin’ Kingfisher Meadows yet, yer poncy fuckin’ maggot.’

I let Wilcox make the next move.

He didn’t. It came from behind. Wayne Nashend pinned me in a full nelson. My Adidas bag was ripped out of my hand. No point in shouting ‘That’s my bag!’ We all knew that. The crucial thing was to not cry.

‘Where’s yer bumfluff, Taylor?’ Ant Little peered at my upper lip. ‘Ain’t yer got any bumfluff left?’

‘I shaved it off.’

““I shaved it off”” Gary Drake mimicked me. ‘That s’posed to impress us?’

‘There’s this joke going round, Taylor,’ said Wilcox. ‘Have yer heard it? “D’yer know Jason Taylor?”’

““N-n-n-o,”” replied Gary Drake. ““B-b-but I t-trod in s-s-some once!””

‘Yer’re a laughing-stock, Taylor,’ spat Ant Little. ‘A piss-flaps toss-pot laughing-stock!’

‘Going to the pictures with your mummy!’ said Gary Drake. ‘You don’t deserve to live. We should hang you from this tree.’

‘Say somethin’, then,’ Ross Wilcox came right up close, ‘Maggot.’

‘Your breath smells really bad, Ross.’

‘What?’ Wilcox’s face arseholed up. ‘WHAT?’

I’d shocked myself, too. But there was no going back. ‘I’m not trying to be insulting, honest. But your breath reeks. Like a bag of ham. Nobody tells you ’cause they’re scared of you. But you should clean your teeth more often or eat mints ’cause it’s chronic.’

Wilcox let a moment drag by.

A sharp double-slap crushed my jaw.

‘Oh, and you’re saying yer not scared of me?’

Pain is a good focuser. ‘It could be halitosis. The chemist in Upton could give you something for it, if it is.’

‘I could kick your head in, you dickless twat!’

‘Yeah, you could. All five of you.’

‘On my fuckin’ own!’

‘I’m not doubting it. I saw you fight Grant Burch, remember.’

The school bus was still by the Black Swan. Norman Bates sometimes gives a bundle to Isaac Pye and Isaac Pye gives Norman Bates a brown envelope. Not that I was expecting any help.

‘This – oily – spacko – maggot’ – Ross Wilcox jabbed my chest with each word – ‘needs – a – GRUNDY!’ A grundy’s where a bunch of kids yank you up, hard, by your underpants. Your feet leave the ground and the crotch of your pants is forced up your bum-crack so your balls and dick get crushed.

So a grundying’s exactly what I got.

But grundies’re only fun if the victim squeals and tries to fight. I steadied myself on Ant Little’s head and sort of rode it out. Grundies humiliate rather than hurt. My attackers pretended to find it funny, but it was heavy, unrewarding work. Wilcox and Nashend trampolined me up and down. My pants just burnt my crotch rather than split me in two. I was dropped on to the soaking grass.

‘That,’ promised Ross Wilcox, panting, ‘is just for starters.’

‘Maaaaaggot!’ Gary Drake sang out of the mist by the Black Swan.
‘Where’s your bag?’

‘Yeah.’ Wayne Nashend booted my arse as I got up. ‘Better find it.’

I sort of hobbled towards Gary Drake, my bumbone smarting.

The school bus revved up. Its gears cranked.

Grinning this sadistic grin, Gary Drake swung my Adidas bag.

Now I saw what was coming and broke into a run.

Tracing a perfect arc, my Adidas bag landed on the roof of the bus.

The bus jerked into motion, off to the crossroads by Mr Rhydd’s.

Changing course, I sprinted through the long wet grass, prayed the bag’d slide off.

Laughter acker-ack-acked after me, like machine guns.

One ½ p of luck rolled my way. A combine harvester'd made a slow traffic jam from Malvern Wells. I managed to reach the school bus while it waited at the crossroads by Mr Rhydd's shop.

'What,' snarled Norman Bates as the door opened, 'd'you think you're playing at?'

'Some boys,' I fought for breath, 'chucked my bag on the roof.'

The kids still on the bus lit up with excitement.

'What roof?'

'The roof of your bus.'

Norman Bates gave me a look like I'd shat in his bap. But he swung down, nearly knocking me over, marched to the end of the bus, climbed up the back-end monkey ladder, grabbed my Adidas bag, lobbed it at me, and climbed back down to the road. 'Yer mates're a bunch o' wankers, Sunbeam.'

'They're not my mates.'

'Then why let 'em push you around?'

'I don't let them. There's five of them. Ten of them. More.'

Norman Bates sniffed. 'But only one King Turd. Right?'

'One or two.'

'One'll do. What yer need is one of these little beauties.' A lethal Bowie knife suddenly rotated in front of my eyes. 'Sneak up on King Turd,' Norman Bates's voice softened, 'and slice – his – tendons. One slit, two slit, tickle him under there. If he fucks around with you after that, just puncture

the tyres on his wheelchair.' Norman Bates's knife disappeared into thin air.
'Army and Navy Surplus Stores. Best tenner you'll ever spend.'

'But if I sliced Wilcox's tendons, I'd get sent to borstal.'

'Well, wakey fucking wakey, Sunbeam! Life's a borstal!'

Knife Grinder

Autumn's fungusy, berries're manky, leaves're rusting, Vs of long-distance birds're crossing the sky, evenings're smoky, nights're cold. Autumn's nearly dead. I hadn't even noticed it was ill.

'I'm back!' Every afternoon I yell it, just in case Mum or Dad'd come home early from Cheltenham or Oxford or wherever.

Not that there's ever a reply.

Our house is bags emptier with Julia gone. Her and Mum drove up to Edinburgh two weekends ago. (Julia passed her driving test. First time, of course.) She'd spent the second half of the summer with Ewan's family in the Norfolk Broads, so you'd think I'd've had time to get used to sisterlessness. But it's not just the person who fills a house, it's their I'll be back later!s, their toothbrushes and not-being-used-right-now hats and coats, their belongingnesses. Can't believe I miss my sister this much, but I do. Mum and Julia left first thing 'cause Scotland's a day away by car. Dad and me waved her off. Mum's Datsun'd turned into Kingfisher Meadows, when it stopped. Julia jumped out, opened the boot, ferreted through her box of records and ran back up the drive. She thrust her Abbey Road LP into my hands. 'Look after this for me, Jace. It'll only get scratched if I take it to halls.' She hugged me.

I still smelt Julia's hair lacquer, even after the car'd gone.

The pressure cooker sat on the cooker, leaked stewing-steak fumes. (Mum starts it off in the morning so it cooks all day.) I made a grapefruit Quash and risked scoffing the last Penguin biscuit 'cause there was nothing else in the tin but Ginger Nuts and Lemon Puffs. I went upstairs to change out of my school uniform. Waiting in my room was the first of the three surprises.

A TV. Sitting on my desk. It hadn't been there this morning. FERGUSON MONOCHROME PORTABLE TELEVISION, said its badge. MADE IN ENGLAND. (Dad says if we don't buy British all the jobs'll go to Europe.) Brand-new shine, brand-new smell. An office envelope with my name on it stood propped up. (Dad'd written my name in 2H pencil so the envelope can be reused.) Inside was a file card, written in green Biro.

To Jason.

I have tuned the set to all 4
channels, so just switch it on
using the ON switch.

from Dad.

Why? I was pleased, for sure. In 3KM only Clive Pike and Neal Brose've got TVs in their bedrooms. But why now? My birthday isn't till January. Dad never gives things like this for no reason, not just out of the blue. I switched the TV on, lay on my bed and watched Space Sentinels and Take Hart. Watching TV on your bed shouldn't be odd, but it somehow is. Like eating oxtail soup in the bath.

TV deadens worrying about school, a bit. Dean was ill today so the seat on the school bus next to me was empty. Ross Wilcox took it, acting all matey to remind me we're not. Wilcox kept on at me to get out my pencil case. 'G-g-go on, l-l-l-lend us yer p-p-protractor, T-t-taylor, honest, I want to do m-my m-m-m-maths homework.' (I don't stammer that badly. Mrs de Roo says we're making real progress.) 'Got a sh-sh-sharpener, T-t-taylor?'

'No', I kept saying, flat and bored. 'No.' The other day he got hold of Floyd Chaceley's pencil case in the maths room and tipped its contents into the Quad.

'What d'yer mean, n-n-no? What d'yer do when your p-p-pencils get b-b-blunt?' Question after needling question, that's the Wilcox Method. Answer, and he'll twist your reply so that it seems only a total twat could've said what you just said. Don't answer, and it's like you're admitting it's okay for Wilcox to be ripping into you. 'S-s-so d-d-d-do girls find your s-s-s-stutter s-s-s-sexy, T-t-taylor?' Oswald Wyre and Ant Little do this jackal laughter like their master's all six Monty Pythons rolled into one comedy thug. Wilcox's power is that you think it's not him speaking but public opinion judging you through him. 'B-b-b-bet it m-m-m-makes 'em fizz in their p-p-p-p-per-per-pah-pah-pi-pi-poo-poo-poo-panties!'

Two rows in front, Squelch suddenly vommed back up a party-sized tube of Smarties he'd wolfed to win a go on Ant Little's Space Invaders calculator. A tide of multi-coloured vomit advancing up the aisle was enough to distract Wilcox. I got off at Drugger's End and went round the back of the village hall and over the Glebe, alone. It takes a while. Over by St Gabriel's some way-too-early fireworks streaked spoon silver against the

Etch-a-Sketch grey sky. Someone's older brother must've bought them from Mr Rhydd's. I was still too poisoned by Wilcox to pick the last watery blackberries of 1982.

Was it the same poison that spoilt Dad's incredible present? John Craven's Newsround was about the Mary Rose. The Mary Rose was Henry VIII's flagship that sank in a storm four centuries ago. It was lifted out of the sea bottom recently. All England was watching. But the silty, drippy, turdy timbers lugged up by the floating cranes look nothing like the shining galleon in the paintings. People're now saying the money should've been spent on hospital beds.

The doorbell rang.

‘Chilly day,’ rasped an old man in a tweed cap. ‘Nip in the air.’ The man was today’s second surprise. His suit had no obvious colour. He had no obvious colour, come to that. I’d put on the door chain ’cause Dad says not even Black Swan Green’s safe from perverts and maniacs. The chain amused the old man. ‘Crown jewels you’ve got stashed away in there, then, is it, eh?’

‘Erm...no.’

‘Ain’t goin’ to huff and puff and blow yer house down, yer know. Lady of the house at home, by any chance?’

‘Mum? No. She’s working in Cheltenham.’

‘A shame that is. Year back, I grinded her knives sharp as razors but no doubt they’ll be blunt again by now. A blunt knife is the most dangerous knife, yer know that? Any doctor’ll tell yer as much.’ His accent skimmed and skittered. ‘Blunt blades slip fierce easy. She’ll be back soon, will she?’

‘Not till seven.’

‘Pity, pity, don’t know when I’ll be passin’ here again. How ’bout yer fetchin’ them knives now, and I’ll make ’em nice and sharp anyway, eh? To surprise her, like. Got my stones and my tools.’ He thumped a lumpy kitbag. ‘Shan’t take no more’n a second. Yer mam’ll be that pleased. The best son in the Three Counties, she’ll call yer.’

I doubted that very much. But I don’t know how you get rid of knife grinders. One rule says you mustn’t be rude. Just shutting the door on him’d’ve been rude. But another rule says Never Talk to Strangers, which I was breaking. Rules should get their stories straight. ‘I’ve only got my pocket money, so I couldn’t afford—’

‘Cut yer a deal, my chavvo. I like a lad who keeps his manners about him. “Manners do maketh the man.” A proper clever haggler, yer mam’ll call

yer. Tell us how much pocket money's in yer piggy bank, and I'll tell yer how many knives I can do for what yer got.'

'Sorry.' This was getting worse. 'I'd best ask Mum first.'

The knife grinder's look was friendly on the surface. 'Never cross the womenfolk! Still, I'll see if I can't call this way in a day or two after all. Unless the squire o' the manor's at home, that is, by any chance?'

'Dad?'

'Aye, Dad.'

'He won't be back till...' You never know these days. Often he calls to say he's stuck in a motel somewhere. 'Late.'

'If he isn't fierce worried about his driveway,' the knife grinder tilted his head and sucked air, 'he needs to be. Tarmac's cracked serious, like. Pack of tinkers laid it originally, that's my guess. Rain'll freeze inside them cracks come winter, prise the tarmac up, see, and by spring it'll be like the moon! Needs tearin' up and re-layin' proper. Me and my brother'll get it done faster than—' (His finger-click was as loud as the popper in Frustration.) 'Tell yer dad from me, will yer do that?'

'Okay.'

'Promise?'

'I promise. I could take your phone number.'

'Telephones? Liarphones, I call 'em. Eye to eye's the only way.'

Knife Grinder heaved up his kitbag and walked down the drive. 'Tell yer dad!' He knew I was watching. 'A promise is a promise, mush!'

‘How generous of him,’ was what Mum said when I told her about the TV. But how she said it was sort of chilling. When I heard Dad’s Rover get home I went out to the garage to thank him. But instead of looking pleased he just mumbled, a bit embarrassed, no, almost like he was sorry about something, ‘Glad it meets with your approval, Jason.’ Only when Mum dished up the stew did I even remember the knife grinder’s visit.

‘Knife grinding?’ Dad forked off some gristle to one side. ‘That’s a gypsy scam, old as the hills. Surprised he didn’t get his Tarot cards out, there on the porch. Or start scavenging for scrap metal. If he comes back, Jason, shut the door on him. Never encourage those people. Worse than Jehovah’s Witnesses.’

‘He said he might,’ now I felt guilty for making that promise, ‘come back to talk about the driveway.’

‘What about the driveway?’

‘It needs retarmac-ing. He said.’

Dad’s face’d turned thundery. ‘And that makes it true, does it?’

‘Michael,’ Mum said, ‘Jason’s just reporting a conversation.’

Beef gristle tastes like deep-seam phlegm. The only real live gypsy I ever met was a quiet kid at Miss Throckmorton’s. His name’s gone now. He must’ve skived off most days ’cause his empty desk became a sort of school joke. He wore a black jumper instead of green and a grey shirt instead of white, but Miss Throckmorton never once did him up for it. A Bedford truck used to drop him off at the school gates. In my memory that Bedford truck’s as large as the whole school. The gypsy kid’d jump down from the cabin. His dad looked like Giant Haystacks the wrestler, with tattoos snaking up his arms. Those tattoos and the glance he shot round the playground made sure no one, not Pete Redmarley, not even Pluto Noak, thought about picking on the gypsy kid. For his part, the gypsy kid sat under the cedar sending out piss off waves. He didn’t give a toss about

Kick-the-Can or Stuck-in-the-Mud. One time, he was at school for a rounders match and he whacked the ball clean over the hedge and into the Glebe. He just strolled round the posts with his hands in his pockets. Miss Throckmorton had to put him in charge of scoring 'cause we ran out of rounders balls. But when we next looked at the scoreboard he'd gone.

I blobbed HP sauce into my stew. 'Who are gypsies, Dad?'

'How do you mean?'

'Well...where did they live originally?'

'Where do you think the word "gypsy" is from? Egyptian.'

'So gypsies're African?'

'Not now, no. They migrated centuries ago.'

'Why don't people like them?'

'Why should decent-minded citizens like layabouts who pay nothing to the state and flout every planning regulation in the book?'

'I think,' Mum sprinkled pepper, 'that's a harsh assessment, Michael.'

'You wouldn't if you'd ever met one, Helena.'

'This knife grinder chap made an excellent job of the scissors and knives, last year.'

'Don't tell me,' Dad's fork stopped in mid-air, 'you know this man?'

'Well, a knife grinder's been coming to Black Swan Green every October for years. Couldn't be sure if it's the same one without seeing him, but I'd imagine he probably is.'

'You've actually given this beggar money?'

'Do you work for nothing, Michael?'

(Questions aren't questions. Questions're bullets.)

Dad's cutlery clinked as he put it down. 'You kept this...transaction hushed up for a whole year?'

"Hushed up"? Mum did a silent huh of strategic shock. 'You're accusing me of "hushing up"?' (That made my guts quease. Dad flashed Mum this Not in front of Jason look. That made my guts quease and shudder.) 'Doubtless I didn't want to clutter your executive day with trivial housewifery.'

'And how much,' Dad wasn't backing off, 'did this vagrant rip you off for?'

'He asked for one pound and I paid it. For sharpening all the knives, and a jolly good job he made of them. One pound. A penny more than one of your frozen Greenland pizzas.'

'I can't believe you fell for this gypsy-shire-horses-painted-wagons-jolly-old-England hokum. For God's sakes, Helena. If you want a knife sharpener buy one from an ironmonger's. Gypsies are work-shy hustlers and once you give them an inch, a horde of his cousins'll be beating a path back to your door till the year 2000. Knives, crystal balls and tarmac today, and car-stripping, raids on garden sheds, flogging stolen goods tomorrow.'

Their arguments're speed chess these days.

I'd finished. 'Can I get down now, please?'

It's Thursday so I watched Top of the Pops and Tomorrow's World up in my room. I heard kitchen cupboards being slammed. I put on a cassette Julia'd made for me from Ewan's LPs. The first song's 'Words (Between The Lines Of Age)' by Neil Young. Neil Young sings like a barn collapsing but his music's brill. A poem called 'Maggot' about why kids who get picked on get picked on began buzzing round my head. Poems are lenses, mirrors and X-ray machines. I doodled for a bit (if you pretend not to look for words they come out of the thickets) but my Biro died so I unzipped my pencil case to get a new one.

Inside, the third surprise was waiting for me.

The scalpel-ed off head of a real live dead mouse.

Tiny teeth, shut eyes, Beatrix Potter whiskers, French mustardy fur, maroon scab, nubby spinal bone. Whiffs of bleach, Spam and pencil shavings.

Go on, they'd've said. Put it in Taylor's pencil case. It'll be an ace laugh. It'd've come from Mr Whitlock's Biology dissection class. Mr Whitlock threatens to dismember anyone nicking mouse parts, but after a flask of his special coffee he gets drowsy and careless.

Go on, Taylor, get out yer pencil case. Ross Wilcox probably sneaked it in there himself. Dawn Madden must've known too. G-g-get out your p-p-p-P-P-PENcil case (Wilcox's eyeballs popped), T-T-ta-t-t-ttt-Taylor.

I got a wad of bog paper to wrap the head in. Downstairs Dad was reading the Daily Mail on the sofa. Mum was doing her accounts on the kitchen table. 'Where're you off to?'

'To the garage. To play darts.'

'What's that tissue you're holding?'

‘Nothing. Just blew my nose.’ I stuffed it in my jeans pocket. Mum was about to demand an inspection but thank God, she changed her mind. Under cover of darkness I sneaked down to the rockery and tossed the head into the Glebe. Ants and weasels’ll eat it, I s’pose.

Those kids must hate me.

After one game of Round-the-Clock I put my darts away and came back inside. Dad was watching a debate about whether or not Britain should have American cruise missiles on its soil. Mrs Thatcher says yes so it'll happen. Since the Falklands no one can tell her no. The doorbell rang, which is odd, on an October evening. Dad must've thought the gypsy was back. 'I'll deal with this,' he announced, and folded his paper with a joky snap. Mum let out this tiny Ffft of disgust. I sneaked up to my spy position on the landing in time for Dad unchaining the door.

'Samuel Swinyard's the name.' (Gilbert Swinyard's dad.) 'My farm's up Drugger's End. Would you have a minute or two?'

'Certainly. I used to buy our Christmas trees from you. Michael Taylor. What can I do for you, Mr Swinyard?'

'Sam's fine. I'm collectin' signatures for a petition, see. You might not know this but Malvern Council're plannin' to build a site for gypsies right here in Black Swan Green. Not temp'ry. Perm'nant, like.'

'This is disturbing news. When was this announced?'

'Exactly, Michael. Never was announced! Tryin' to sneak it through on the sly, they are, so no 'un catches on till it's done and dusted! They're plannin' on puttin' the site down Hake's Lane, by the incinerator. Oh, they're all craft, that Malvern Council lot are. Don't want the gyppos in their own back yard, no thank you very much. Forty caravans, they've earmarked land for. Forty, they say, but there'll be hundred's of 'em once it's built, once you add on their relatives an' hangers-onners. Proper Calcutta it'll turn into. Count on it.'

'Where do I sign?' Dad took the clipboard and scribbled his name. 'As a matter of fact, one of those gypsy...blighters...called here this afternoon. Around four o'clock, when housewives and children are likeliest to be at home, unprotected.'

‘Don’t surprise me one bit. Been duckerin’ all round Wellington Gardens too, they was. Older houses’ve got more precious junk to scav, see, that’s their reck’nin’. But if this camp goes ahead, it’ll be more o’ the same every day! And once scavvin’ stops workin’ for gypsies, they try more direct ways to cross their palms with our silver, if you catch my meanin’.’

‘I hope,’ Dad returned the clipboard, ‘you’re getting a positive response to your efforts, Sam?’

‘Only three refusals who’re half-gypyo ’emselves, if you ask me. The vicar said he can’t get involved in “party-zan politics” but his missus nudged him fast enough, sayin’ she ain’t no clergyman. Every’un else – as quick to sign as yourself, Michael. There’ll be an emergency meetin’ in the village hall Wednesday comin’ to discuss how best to stuff them pillocks up in Malvern Council. Can I count on yer bein’ there?’

Wish I'd said yes. Wish I'd said, 'Here's my pocket money, sharpen what you can, please, right now.' The knife grinder'd've got his gear out, there, on our doorstep. His metal files, stones, his (what?) flint flywheel. Crouched over it, his face glowing and creased like a goblin, eyes burning dangerous. One claw making the flywheel spin, faster, blurrier, one claw bringing the blunt blades closer, slowly, closer, till the stone touches the metal and buzzsawing sparks gush, furious blue, dribble, spurt into the drizzly Coke-dark dusk. I'd've smelt the hot metal. Heard it shriek itself sharp. One by one, he'd work through the dull knives. One by one, old blades'd be made newer than new and whistlier than Norman Bates's Bowie knife and sharp enough to pass through muscle, bone, hours, dread, through Those kids must hate me. Sharp enough to slice What'll they do to me tomorrow? into wafers.

God, I wish I'd said yes.



Being seen with either of your parents in public is pretty gay. But tonight loads of kids were walking to the village hall with their parents too, so that rule didn't apply. The windows of Black Swan Green village hall (erected 1952) glowed buttery yellow. It's only a three-minute walk from Kingfisher Meadows, slap bang by Miss Throckmorton's. Primary school seemed so huge then. How can you be sure anything is ever its real size?

The village hall smells of cigarettes, wax, dust, cauliflower and paint. If Mr and Mrs Woolmere hadn't saved us chairs up front, Dad and I'd've had

to've stood at the back. The last time it was as full as tonight was on the Christmas nativity play night, when I'd been a Scruffy Urchin of Bethlehem. The audience's eyes reflected the stage lights like cat's-eyes at night. Hangman made me have to half-fudge a few key lines, to Miss Throckmorton's disgust. But I'd played the xylophone okay and sung 'White or Black or Yellow or Red, Come See Jesus in His Shed' okay too. You don't stammer when you sing. Julia had braces for her teeth then, like Jaws' in *The Spy Who Loved Me*. She told me I was a natural. That wasn't true but was so nice of her I've never forgotten.

So anyway, tonight the audience was hysterical, like a war was about to break out. Cigarette fug blurred the lines. Mr Yew was here, Colette Turbot's mum, Mr and Mrs Rhydd, Leon Cutler's mum and dad, Ant Little's dad the baker (who's always at war with the hygiene people). All yackering yackerly to be heard over the yackering yacker. Grant Burch's dad was saying how gypsies steal dogs for fighting and then eat the evidence. 'It happens in Anglesey!' Andrea Bozard's mum agreed. 'It'll happen here!' Ross Wilcox sat between his dad the mechanic and his new stepmother. His dad's a bigger, bonier, redder-eyed version of his son. Wilcox's stepmother couldn't stop sneezing. I tried to avoid looking at them, the way you try not to be sick by ignoring the fact you're about to be. But I couldn't help it. Up on the stage with Gilbert Swinyard's dad were Gwendolin Bendincks the vicar's wife and Kit Harris the borstal teacher who lives up the bridleway with his dogs. (Nobody'd try to steal his dogs.) Kit Harris's got a gash of white in his black hair so all the kids call him Badger. Our neighbour Mr Castle walked on from the wings to take the last chair. He gave Dad and Mr Woolmere a heroic nod. Dad and Mr Woolmere returned the nod. Mr Woolmere muttered to Dad, 'Didn't take old Gerry long to get in on the action...' Taped to the front of the trestles was a length of wallpaper. On it was painted VILLAGE CAMP CRISIS COMMITTEE. The VCC and C were blood red. All the other letters were black.

Mr Castle got to his feet and the hushers began hushing the yackers. Last year Dean Moran and Robin South and me were playing footy and Moran wellied his ball into the Castles' garden, but when he asked for it back Mr Castle said it'd crushed a hybrid rose worth £35 and he wouldn't give Moran's ball back till we'd paid for his rose, which means never, 'cause you don't have £35 when you're thirteen.

'Ladies, gentlemen, fellow Black Swans. That so many of you have braved this frosty evening is in itself proof of the strength of feeling in our community about our elected council's shameful – shameless – attempt to meet its obligations under the' – he cleared his throat – '1968 Caravan Sites Act, by turning our village – home, to all of us – into a dump for so-called "travellers", "gypsies", "Romany" or whatever the correct "liberal" – with a very small L – phrase is in vogue this week. That not a single councillor bothered to appear this evening is less than edifying proof' (Isaac Pye, the landlord of the Black Swan, yelled, 'We'd've lynched the buggers out on the green, that's why!' and Mr Castle smiled like a patient uncle till the laughter'd died away) 'is less than edifying proof of their duplicity, cowardice and the weakness of their case.' (Applause. Mr Woolmere shouted, 'Well said, Gerry!') 'Before we begin, the committee wishes to welcome Mr Hughes of the Malvern Gazetteer' (a man in the front row with a notepad nodded) 'for slotting us into his busy diary. We trust his report of the outrage being perpetrated by those criminals at Malvern Council will reflect his newspaper's reputation for fair play.' (That sounded more of a threat than a welcome.) 'Now. Apologists for gypsies will inevitably drone, "What do you have against these people?" I say, "How much time have you got? Vagrancy. Theft. Sanitation. Tuberculosis..."' I missed what he said next, thinking how the villagers wanted the gypsies to be gross, so the grossness of what they're not acts as a stencil for what the villagers are.

‘Nobody denies that the Romany people need a permanent place of abode.’ Gwendolin Bendincks’s hands shielded her heart. ‘Romanies are mothers and fathers, just like us. Romanies want what they believe is best for their children, just like us. Heaven knows I’m not prejudiced against any group of people, however “way out” their colour or creed, and I’m sure no one in this hall is either. We are all Christians. Indeed, without a permanent site, how will Romanies ever be taught the responsibilities of citizenship? How else will they be taught that law and order guarantee their children a brighter future than begging, horse-dealing and petty crime? Or that eating hedgehogs is simply not a civilized act?’ Dramatic pause. (I thought how all leaders can sense what people’re afraid of and turn that fear into bows and arrows and muskets and grenades and nukes to use however they want. That’s power.) ‘But why oh why do the powers that be believe that Black Swan Green is an appropriate location for their “project”? Our village is a finely balanced community! A horde of outsiders, especially one of, shall we say, “problem families”, swamping our school and our surgery would tip us into chaos! Misery! Anarchy! No, a permanent site has to be near a city big enough to mop them up. A city with infrastructure. Worcester, or better still, Birmingham! The message we send to Malvern Council is united and strong. “Don’t you dare fob your responsibilities off on to us. Country people we may be, but by golly yokels that you can hoodwink we are jolly well not!”’ Gwendolin Bendincks smiled at her standing ovation like a cold man smiling into a bonfire.

'I'm a patient man.' Samuel Swinyard stood feet planted apart. 'Patient and tol'rant. I'm a farmer, I'm proud of it, an' farmers ain't people to get a bee in their bonnets about nothin'.' (A rash of good-humoured mutterings broke out.) 'I ain't sayin' I'd be objectin' to a perm'nant campment'n all for gypsies if they was pure gypsies. My dad Abe used to employ a few pure gypsies come harvest-time. When they put their minds to it they was hard 'nough workers. Dark as niggers, teeth strong as horses', their people'd wintered'n all in the Chilterns since the flood. Had to keep an eye on 'em. Slipp'ry as the Devil they could be. Like in the war and they all dressed up as women or buggered off to Ireland to avoid goin' off to Normandy. But at least with pure gypsies yer knew what they was an' where you stood. Now why I'm on this stage tonight is, most of these characters driftin' round callin' 'emselves gypsies're chancers an' bankrupts an' crim'nals who wouldn't know a pure gypsy if one flew up his' (Isaac Pye shouted 'Arse, Sam, arse!' and a giant fart of laughter erupted from the back of the hall) 'nose, Isaac Pye, nose! Beatniks an' hippies an' tinkers'n all who tag 'emselves "gypsies" so they can qualify for handouts! Unedyercated scroungers after "Social Security". Oooh, it's all flush-toilet campsites'n all they're wantin' now! Social workers flappin' round at their every beck and call! Why don't I call myself a gypsy and get all this loot'n all for free, eh? Beats workin' for a livin'! 'Cause if I wanted to—'

The fire alarm blared out.

Samuel Swinyard frowned, annoyed. Not scared, 'cause there's no such thing as a real fire alarm, only fire drills. We had one at school just last week. We had to walk out of French in an orderly fashion and line up in the playground. Mr Whitlock stormed round yelling, 'Burnt to toast! The lot of you! TOAST! Deformed, for life!' Mr Carver made a megaphone with his hands and shouted, 'At least Nicholas Briar won't be on his own any more!'

But the village hall alarm went on, and on, and on.

People round us began saying 'Ridiculous!' and 'Can't some Einstein turn the bloody thing off?' Gwendolin Bendincks said something to Mr Castle, who cupped his ear to say What? Gwendolin Bendincks repeated it. What? A few people'd stood up now and were looking round, anxiously.

Fifty shouts exploded at the back. ‘FIRE!’

The village hall was instantly a tipping churn of panic.

Boiling hollers and fried shrieks swarmed over our heads. Chairs went flying and actually bounced. ‘Gypsies’ve gone and torched the place!’ Then the lights went out. ‘Get out! Get out!’ In that awful darkness Dad’d pulled me into him (the zip of his coat gouged my nose) like I was a baby. We stayed put right there, right in the middle of the row. I could smell his under-arm deodorant. A shoe whacked my shin. One flickery emergency light came on. By its glow I saw Mrs Rhydd hammering on the fire exit. ‘Locked! The ruddy thing’s locked!’ Wilcox’s dad was breaststroking people out of his way. ‘Smash the windows! Smash the sodding windows!’ Only Kit Harris was calm. He contemplated the crowd like a hermit contemplating some quiet forest. Colette Turbot’s mum screamed as a string of whopping pearls unstringed themselves and bounced under hundreds of feet. ‘You’re crushing my hand!’ Walls of villagers skittled over, down, around, over. A headless crowd’s the most dangerous animal.

‘It’s all right, Jason!’ Dad was squeezing me so tight I could hardly breathe. ‘I’ve got you!’



Dean Moran's place is actually two tumblly cottages knocked together and it's so old it's still got an outside bog. Pissing into the next-door field's fresher so I usually do that. Today I got off the school bus with Dean at Drugger's End with him 'cause we were going to play on his Sinclair ZX Spectrum 16k. But Dean's sister Kelly'd sat on the tape recorder that morning so we couldn't load any games. Kelly does the Pick'n'Mix at Woolworths in Malvern and what Kelly sits on isn't ever the same again. So Dean suggested we customize Operation in his bedroom. Dean's bedroom wall's papered with posters of West Bromwich Albion. West Brom're always getting relegated, but Dean and his dad've always supported West

Brom and that's that. Operation's this game where you take out bones from a patient's body. If you touch the sides with the tweezers his nose-buzzer buzzes and you don't collect your surgeon's fee. We tried to rewire Operation with a giant battery so you'd get electrocuted if you touched the sides. We killed Operation and the patient for ever, but Dean says he got bored of it yonks ago. Outside we made a crazy golf course with planks, pipes and old horseshoes from the choked orchard where Dean's garden stops. Evil frilly toadstools'd broken out of the rotted stump. A moon-grey cat watched us from the roof of the outdoors bog. We found two clubs but couldn't find a single ball, not even in the bottomless shed. We did find a broken loom and the bones of a motorbike. 'How about,' suggested Dean, 'we have a looksy down our well?'

The well's covered by a dustbin lid under a stack of bricks to stop Dean's sister Maxine falling in. We took the bricks off, one by one. 'Yer can hear a drownin' girl's voice, some nights when there's no wind an' no moon.'

'Yeah, sure you do, Dean.'

'Swear on me nan's grave! A little girl drowned in this well. Her petticoats an' that pulled her under before they could rescue her.'

This was all too detailed to be bullshit. 'When?'

Dean dumped the last brick. 'Olden times.'

We peered down. Our heads were tombed in the quiverless mirror. Hush of a tomb, and as chilly.

'How deep does it go?'

'Dunno.' The well elastics words down, then catapults echoes up. 'One time me and Kelly tied a fishing lead to a line and lowered it down, right, and after fifty metres it were still goin' down.'

Just the thought of falling down sent my balls ferreting up.

Damp October dusk gathered round the well.

‘Mama!’ A kitteny voice blasted us away. ‘I CAN’T SWIM!’

Shat myself. I shat myself.

Mr Moran had hysterics.

‘Dad!’ Dean groaned.

‘Sorry, lads, couldn’t resist it!’ Mr Moran wiped his eyes. ‘Just came out to plant next year’s daffodillies, heard what you were talking about, and I could not resist!’

‘Well, I don’t half wish,’ Dean replaced the lid, ‘you had of!’

Dean's dad set up ping-pong by balancing a wall of spine-up books across the kitchen table. Our bats were Ladybird books. (Mine was The Elves and the Shoemaker and Dean played with Rumpelstiltskin. Right spazzers we must've looked, specially Mr Moran, who played cradling a can of Dr Pepper. (Dr Pepper's fizzy Benylin.) Brill laugh it was, mind. More fun than my portable TV, any day. Dean's little sister Maxine kept score. The whole family call her Mini Max. We played Winner Stays On. Dean's mum got home from the old folk's home where she works, on the Malvern Road. She just took one look at us, said, 'Frank Moran,' and lit a fire that smelt of dry roasted peanuts. My dad says real fires are more faff than they're worth, but Dean's dad says in a Tavish McTavish voice, 'Neeever buy ye a hoose wi'oot a chimberly pot.' Mrs Moran pinned her hair back with a knitting needle and thrashed me, 21–7, but instead of staying on Mrs Moran read aloud from the Malvern Gazetteer: BURNT CRUMPETS UNLEASH ANARCHY AT VILLAGE HALL! “Black Swan Green villagers learnt you can have smoke without fire on Wednesday. The inaugural meeting of the Village Camp Crisis Committee, set up by residents to fight a proposed gypsy site in Hakes Lane, Black Swan Green, was interrupted by a fire alarm which triggered a frantic stampede...” Well, dearie, dearie me.’ (The article itself wasn't funny but Mrs Moran read it in this yokel news-voice that made us pee ourselves.) “Emergency services rushed to the scene, only to discover the alarm had been triggered by smoke from a toaster. Four people were treated for injuries caused by the stampede. Eyewitness Gerald Castle, of Kingfisher Meadows, Black Swan Green—” That's your neighbour, ain't it, Jason? “—told the Gazetteer, ‘It's a minor miracle nobody was maimed for life.’” Oh, sorry, I shouldn't be laughin'. It's not funny at all, really. Did you actually see this stampede, Jason?”

‘Yes, Dad took me. The village hall was packed. Weren't you there?’

Mr Moran'd gone sort of stony. ‘Sam Swinyard came sniffin' round for my signature but I politely declined him.’ The conversation'd taken a wrong turn. ‘Impressed by the level of debate, were you?’

‘People were pretty much against the camp.’

'Oh, doubtless they were! Folks'll do bugger-all while the unions their grandfathers died for get dismantled by that creature in Downing Street! But once they smell a threat to their house prices they're up in arms faster'n any revolutionary!'

'Frank,' Mrs Moran said, like a handbrake.

'I ain't ashamed of Jason knowing I've got gypsy blood in my veins! My grandfather was one, Jason, see. That's why we didn't go to the meeting. Gypsies ain't angels but they ain't devils neither. No more an' no less than farmers or postmen or landlords, anyhow. Folks ought to just leave 'em be.'

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I just nodded.

'Nattering won't get supper on the table.' Mrs Moran got up. Mr Moran got out his Word Puzzler's Weekly. Word Puzzler's Weekly's got ladies in bikinis on the cover but nothing nudier inside. Maxine, Dean and I put the Ladybird books away till the smell of gammon and mushrooms filled the small kitchen. I helped Dean lay the table to postpone going home. The Morans' cutlery drawer isn't scientifically divided like ours. It's all higgledy-piggledy. 'You'll be stayin' for a bite, Jason?' Dean's mum peeled potatoes. 'Mi'lady Kelly phoned me at work. They're all off for pie and chips after work 'cause it's somebody's birthday, so we've got room for one more.'

'Go on,' urged Dean's dad. 'Ring your Mum on our jellybone.'

'Better not.' Actually I'd've loved to stay, but Mum throws an eppy if I don't book meals at other kids' houses weeks in advance. Dad goes all policeman-like too, as if the offence is too serious to merely get cross at. Dad eats dinner in Oxford more often than he eats at home these days, mind. 'Thanks for having me.'

Dusk'd sucked mist from the ground. The clocks're going back next weekend. Mum'd be home from Cheltenham soon but I wasn't in any hurry. So I went the long way via Mr Rhydd's shop. Less chance of running across Ross Wilcox's lot if I avoided the mouth of Wellington Gardens, I thought. But just as I passed the lychgate of St Gabriel's, kids' shouts spilt out of Colette Turbot's garden. Not good.

Not good at all. Up ahead were Ross Wilcox himself, Gary Drake and ten or fifteen kids. Older kids, too, like Pete Redmarley and the Tookey Brothers. War'd broken out. Conkers for bullets, crab apples and windfallen pears for heavy artillery. Spare ammo was carried in pouches made of turned-up sweaters. A stray acorn whistled by my ear. Once I'd've just picked the side with the most popular kids on and joined in but 'once' isn't now. Chances are the cry'd go up, 'G-g-g-get T-t-t-taylor!' and both armies'd turn their fire on me. If I tried to leg it, there'd be a fox hunt through the village with Wilcox as the huntmaster and me as the fox.

So I slipped into the ivy-choked bus shelter before anyone spotted me. The buses to Malvern and Upton and Tewkesbury once stopped here, but they've mostly been cancelled now 'cause of cuts. Snoggers and graffitiers've taken it over. Fruit bounced past the doorway. I realized I'd just trapped myself. Pete Redmarley's army were falling back this way with Gary Drake and Ross Wilcox's lot war-crying after them. I peered out. A cooking apple exploded spectacularly on Squelch's head, ten feet away. In seconds the defenders'd draw level and I'd be found hiding. Being found hiding's worse than just being found.

Squelch rubbed apple from his eye, then looked at me.

Shit scared he'd give me away, I put my finger on my lip.

Squelch's gurn turned to a grin. He put his finger on his lip.

I darted out of the shelter, across the Malvern Road. I had no time to find a path so I just jumped into the denseness. Holly. Just my luck. I sank down through prickly leaves. My neck and bum got scratched but scratches don't

hurt like humiliation hurts. Miracle of miracles, no one trumpeted out my name. The battle spilt this way and that, so close to my hiding place I heard Simon Sinton mumble instructions to himself. The bus shelter I'd left twenty seconds ago was requisitioned as a bunker.

‘That hurt, Croome, you tosser!’

‘Oh, did it hurt, poor little Robin South? I’m so sorry!’

‘C’mon, you lot! Show ’em who this village belongs to!’

‘Kill ’em! Massacre ’em! Dump ’em in a pit! Bury ’em!’

Pete Redmarley’s forces rallied. The battle stayed vicious but staleimated. The air thickened with missiles and the cries of the hit. Wayne Nashend foraged for ammo just feet from my hiding place. It looked like the war’d spilled into the woods. My only way out was deeper in.

The wood invited me on, curtain after curtain, like sleep. Ferns stroked my forehead and picked my pockets. Nobody knows you're here, murmured the trees, anchoring down for the winter.

Picked-on kids act invisible to reduce the chances of being noticed and picked on. Stammerers act invisible to reduce the chances of being made to say something we can't. Kids whose parents argue act invisible in case we trigger another skirmish. The Triple Invisible Boy, that's Jason Taylor. Even I don't see the real Jason Taylor much these days, 'cept for when we're writing a poem, or occasionally in a mirror, or just before sleep. But he comes out in woods. Ankley branches, knuckly roots, paths that only might be, earthworks by badgers or Romans, a pond that'll ice over come January, a wooden cigar box nailed behind the ear of a secret sycamore where we once planned a tree house, birdstuffedtwigsnapped silence, toothy bracken, and places you can't find if you're not alone. Time in woods's older than time in clocks, and truer. Ghosts of Might Be run riot in woods, and stationery shops and messes of stars. Woods don't bother with fences or borders. Woods are fences and borders. Don't be afraid. You see better in the dark. I'd love to work with trees. Druids don't exist nowadays, but foresters do. A forester in France. What tree cares if you can't spit your words out?

This druid feeling I get in woods's so thrilling it makes me want to crap, so I dug a hole with a flat stone inside a clump of mitten-leaved shrubs. I pulled down my cacks and squatted. It's ace shitting outside like a caveman. Let go, thud, subtle crinkle on dry leaves. Squatted craps come out smoother than craps in bogs. Crap's peatier and steamier in open air, too. (My one fear is bluebottles flying up my arsehole and laying eggs in my lower intestine. Larvae'd hatch and get to my brain. My cousin Hugo told me it actually happened to an American kid called Akron Ohio.) 'Am I normal,' I said aloud just to hear my voice, 'talking to myself in a wood like this?' A bird so near it might've perched on a curl of my ear musicked a flute in a jar. I quivered to own such an unownable thing. If I could've climbed into that moment, that jar, and never ever left, I would've done. But my squatting calves were aching, so I moved. The unownable bird took fright and vanished down its tunnel of twigs and nows.

I'd just wiped my arse with mitten-leaves when this massive dog, big as a bear, this brown-and-white wolf, padded out of the murky bracken.

I thought I was going to die.

But the wolf calmly picked up my Adidas bag in its teeth and trotted off down the path.

Only a dog, trembled Maggot, it's gone, it's okay, we're safe.

A dead man's groan unwound itself from deep inside me. Six exercise books including Mr Whitlock's plus three textbooks. Gone! What'd I say to the teachers? 'I can't hand in my homework, sir. A dog ran off with it.' Mr Nixon'd bring back the cane just to punish my lack of originality.

Far too late I jumped up to give chase, but my snake-clasp belt twanged undone, my trousers unhoiked and I flew head over arse like Laurel and Hardy. Leaf mould in my underpants, a twig up my nose.

Nothing for it but follow the way the dog might've gone, scanning the clotted woods for patches of trotting white. Whitlock's sarcasm'd be everlasting. Mrs Coscombe's fury'd be hot as ovens. Mr Inkberrow's disbelief'd be as unbendy as his blackboard ruler. Shit, shit, shit. First every kid labels me as a tragic case, now half the teachers'll think I'm a waste of space. 'What were you doing traipsing through the woods at that hour?'

An owl? Here was a bent glade I knew from when us village kids used to fight war games in the woods. Pretty seriously we took it, with prisoners of war, ceasefires, flags one side had to steal (footy socks on a stick) and rules of combat that were half tag, half judo. More sophisticated than those Passchendaeles back on the Malvern Road, anyhow. When field marshals picked their men I was snapped up 'cause I was an ace dodger and tree-climber. Those war games were ace. Sport at school isn't the same. Sport doesn't let you be someone you're not. War games're extinct now. Us lot were the last ones. Apart from the lake where people walk dogs, every season chokes up more and more paths in the woods. Ways in've been wired off or walled up by brambles and farmers. Things get dense and thorny if they're left on their own. People're getting edgy about kids running around after dark like we used to. A newspaper boy called Carl Bridgewater was murdered not long ago, in Gloucestershire. Gloucestershire's only next door. The police found his body in a wood like this.

Thinking about Carl Bridgewater made me a bit scared. A bit. A murderer might dump a body in a wood but it'd be an idiotic place to wait for victims. Black Swan Green Wood isn't Sherwood Forest or Vietnam. All I had to do to get home was backtrack, or keep going till I reached fields.

Yeah, without my Adidas school bag.

Twice I saw a patch of white and thought, The dog!

One time it was just a silver birch. The second time, a placky bag.

This was hopeless.

The lip of the old quarry reared up. I'd forgotten it since the war games stopped. Not a big drop, but you wouldn't want to tumble down it. The bottom was a sort of three-sided basin with a track going out that led to Hakes Lane. Or is it Pig Lane? I was surprised to see there were lights and voices on the quarry floor. Five or six caravans, I counted, plus motor homes and a truck, a horsebox, a Hillman van and a motorbike and sidecar. A generator was chugging. Gypsies, I thought, has to be. At the foot of the scree below my overhang about seven or eight figures sat round a dirty fire. Dogs, too.

No sign of the wolf who'd robbed me, and no sign of my Adidas bag. But surely, it was likelier my bag'd be here than anywhere else in the wood. Problem was, how does a kid from a four-bedroom house down Kingfisher Meadows with Everest double glazing go up to gypsies and accuse their dogs of nicking stuff?

I had to.

How could I? I went to that Village Camp Crisis Committee meeting. But my bag. At the very least, I figured, I should come into their camp by the main track, so they didn't think I was spying on them.

'Gonna stay spyin' on us all evenin', are yer?'

If Dean Moran's dad'd put five shits up me, this rammed home ten. A broken-nosed face appeared in the clotted dark behind me. Fierce. 'No,' I might've begun pleading, 'I just thought—' But I didn't finish 'cause I'd taken a step back.

Empty air.

Stones, soil sliding, me sliding with it, down and round and (You'll be lucky if you only break a leg, said Unborn Twin) round and down and ('Feck!' and 'Mind it!' and 'MIND IT!' shouted real humans) and down and round and (dice in a tumbler) round and down and (caravans campfire collarbones) breath whacked out of my lungs as I came to a dead stop.

Dogs were going wild, inches away.

'GERROUT O'HERE, YER GERT DAFT BUGGERS!'

Streams of pebbles and dirt caught up with me.

'Well,' the voice rasped, 'where in bugger did he drop from?'

It was like when someone on TV wakes in hospital and faces swim up, but spookier 'cause of the dark. My body ached in twenty places. Scraper pain, not axed pain, so I reckoned I'd be able to walk. My vision spun like a washing machine at the end of its cycle. 'A kid's skidded down the quarry!' rang out voices. 'A kid's skidded down the quarry!' More people appeared in the firelight. Suspicious if not hostile.

An old man spoke in a foreign language.

'Don't have to bury him yet! T'ain't a cliff he dropped!'

'It's okay,' grit clogged my mouth, 'I'm okay.'

A near one asked, 'Can yer stand up, boy?'

I tried but the ground hadn't stopped tumbling yet.

'Wobbly on his trotters,' the raspy voice decided. 'Park yer arse a mo, mush, round the fire. Help us, one of yer...'

Two arms supported me the few steps to the fire. An aproned mother and daughter stepped from a caravan where Midlands Today was on. Both

women looked hard as hammers. One held a baby. Kids jostled to get a better look. Wilder and way harder than any kid in my year, even Ross Wilcox. Rain, colds, scraps, bullies, handing in homework on time, such things didn't worry these kids.

One teenager was whittling at a lump and not paying me the blindest bit of notice. Firelight flashed off his sure knife. A mop of hair hid half his face.

The raspy man turned into the knife grinder. This reassured me, but only a bit. Him on my doorstep was one thing, but me crashing down here wasn't the same. 'Sorry to...thanks, but I'd best be off.'

'I caught him, Bax!' Bust-nosed Boy came bum-skiing down the scree. 'But the divvy fell off himself! I never pushed him! But I should of! Spyin', he was, the spyin' bugger!'

Knife Grinder looked at me. 'You ain't ready to leave yet, chavvo.'

‘This’ll, er’ (Hangman blocked ‘sound’) ‘appear weird, but I was in the woods over by St Gabriel’s – the church – and I’d just’ (Hangman blocked ‘sat’) ‘I’d just rested when this dog’ (God, this sounded so pathetic) ‘this massive dog came up and grabbed my bag and ran off with it.’ (Not one flicker of sympathy on not one face.) ‘It’s got all my exercise books and textbooks in.’ Hangman was making me duck words like a liar does. ‘Then I followed the dog, well, I tried to, but it got dark, and the path, well, kind of path, just led me to...’ I pointed up behind me. ‘Up there. I saw you down here but I wasn’t spying on you.’ (Even the baby looked dubious.) ‘Honest, I just wanted my bag back.’

The whittler still whittled.

A woman asked, ‘Why was yer in the wood in the first place?’

‘Hiding.’ Only the unpretty truth’d do.

‘Hiding?’ her daughter demanded. ‘Who from?’

‘A bunch of kids. Village kids.’

‘What yer do to ’em?’ asked Bust-nosed Boy.

‘Nothing. They just don’t like me.’

‘Why not?’

‘How should I know?’

“Course yer know!”

Of course I do. ‘I’m not one of them. That’s it. That’s enough.’

Warmth slimed my palm and a fangy lurcher looked back up. A man with greased-back hair and sideburns snorted at an older one. ‘Should o’ seen yer face, Bax! When the boy came tumbling down out of nowhere!’

‘Frit as sin, I was!’ The old man chucked a beer can into the fire. ‘An’ I don’t mind ownin’ it, Clem Ostler. Thought he was a mulo up from the graveyard. Or gorgios chuckin’ stoves or fridges down like that time up Pershore way. Nah, I never got a good feelin’ about this atchin-sen.’ (Either gypsies bend words out of shape, or they have new words for things.) ‘This ‘un’ (I got a suspicious nod) ‘a-creepin’ up on us jus’ proves it.’

‘Ain’t it more polite,’ Knife Grinder turned to me, ‘just to ask’ bout yer bag, if yer thought we had it?’

‘Reckon we’d skewer yer an’ roast yer alive, didn’t yer?’ The woman’s folded forearms were thick as cables. ‘Everyone knows us gypsies’re all partial for a bit o’ gorgio in the pot, ain’t that right?’

I shrugged, miserable. The whittler still whittled. Wood smoke and oil fumes, bodies and cigarettes, bangers and beans, sweet and sour manure. These people’s lives’re freer than mine, but mine’s ten times more comfortable and I’ll probably be alive longer.

‘S’pose, now,’ a short man spoke from a throne of stacked-up tyres, ‘we help yer look for this bag o’ yours? What’d yer give us back?’

‘Have you got my bag?’

Bust-nosed Boy shot back, ‘What you accusin’ my uncle of?’

‘Steady, Al.’ Knife Grinder yawned. ‘He ain’t harmed us so far as I can see. But how he might earn a bit o’ goodwill is tellin’ us if that carry-on at the village hall Wednesday last was over that “perm’nant site” the council’re after building down Hakes Lane. Half the bones o’ Black Swan Green was sardined in there. Never seen the like.’

Honesty and confessing’re so often the same. ‘It was.’

Knife Grinder leant back pleased, as if he’d won a bet.

‘You went along, did yer?’ asked the one called Clem Ostler.

I'd already hesitated too long. 'My dad took me. But the meeting was interrupted halfway because—'

'Find out everything about us,' demanded the daughter, 'did yer?'

'Not a lot' was the safest thing to say.

'Gorgios,' Clem Ostler's eyes were slits, 'don't know one fat rat squeak about us. Yer "experts" know even less.'

Bax the old man nodded. 'Mercy Watts's family got moved on to one o' them "official sites" down Sevenoaks way. Rents, queues, lists, wardens. Council houses on wheels, they are.'

'That's the dumbfool joke of it!' Knife Grinder poked the fire. 'We don't want 'em built any more'n yer locals. That new law, that's what this whole blue-arsed carry-on's about.'

Bust-nosed Boy said, 'What new law's that then, Uncle?'

'Goes like this. If the council ain't built their quota o' perm'nt sites, the law says we can atch wherever we please. But a council what has got the quota can get the gavvas to move us on if we're atchin' anywhere what ain't a perm'nt site. This is what this place down Hakes Lane's about. Ain't 'bout kindness.'

'Learn that at yer meetin','' the mother scowled at me, 'did yer?'

'Once they get us tied down,' Clem Ostler didn't let me reply, 'then they'll be crammin' our chavvies into their schools, turnin' us all into Yessirs, Nossirs, Three Bags Full, Sirs. Turn us into a bunch o' didicois an' kennicks, stuffed up in brick houses. Wipe us off the Earth, like Adolf Hitler tried to. Oh, more gradual like, much gentler, but get rid of us all the same.'

"“Assimilation”." Bust-nosed Boy glared my way. 'That's what social workers call it, ain't it?'

'I' – I shrugged – 'don't know.'

‘S’prised a gypo knows a big word like that? Yer don’t know who I am, do yer? Oh, I remember you all right. These yots don’t forgets a face. We was both at the littl’uns school in the village. Frogmartin, Figmartin, the teacher’s name was, summat like that. Yer was stuttery then, too, wasn’t yer? We was playin’ that game, that Hangman game.’

My memory passed me the gypsy kid’s name. ‘Alan Wall.’

‘That’s my name, Stuttery, don’t wear it out.’

‘Stuttery’ was an improvement on ‘Spy’.

‘What,’ the mother lit a cigarette, ‘gets my goat about gorgios is how they call us dirty when they have toilets in the same room they wash in! And all use the same spoons and cups and bath water and don’t throw their rubbish for the wind an’ rain to sort out natural, no, they keep their muck to go rotten in boxes!’ She shuddered. ‘Inside their houses!’

‘Sleepin’ with their pets an’ all.’ Clem Ostler poked the fire. ‘Dogs’re mucky enough, but cats. Fleas, dirt, fur, all in the same bed. Ain’t that right? Oy, Stuttery!’

I’d been thinking how gypsies wanted the rest of us to be gross, so the grossness of what they’re not acts as a stencil for what they are. ‘Some people let their pets sleep on their bed, sure, but—’

“Nother thing.” Bax spat into the fire. ‘Gorgios don’t just marry one girl and stick with her, not nowadays. They’ll get divorced quick as changin’ cars, despite their fancy weddin’ vows.’ (Tuts and nods all round the fire, ’cept for the whittler. By now I’d guessed he was deaf or dumb.) ‘Like that butcher in Worcester who divorced Becky Smith when she got too saggy.’

‘Gorgios’ll rut anythin’, married or no, livin’ or no,’ Clem Ostler went on. ‘Dogs on heat. Anywhere, any time, in cars, down alleys, in skips, anywhere. And they call us “anti-social”.’

Everyone chose the same moment to look at me.

‘Please,’ I had nothing to lose, ‘has anyone seen my school bag?’

““A school bag”, is it now?” Tyre Man sort of teased. ““A school bag”?”

‘Oh, put the boy out of his misery,’ muttered Knife Grinder.

Tyre Man lifted up my Adidas bag. ‘A bag like this?’ (I choked down an Oh of relief.) ‘Yer welcome to it, Stuttery! Books never taught a man to mong or ducker.’ A circle of hands passed the bag to me.

Thanks, blurted out Maggot. ‘Thanks.’

‘Fritz ain’t too picky ’bout what he brings back.’ Tyre Man whistled. The wolf who’d robbed me lolloped out of the dark. ‘My brother’s juk, ain’t yer, Fritz? Stayin’ with me till he’s let out of his lodgings in Kiddymminster. Greyhound legs, collie brains, ain’t yer, Fritz? I’ll miss yer. Drop Fritz over a gate an’ he’ll get yer a fat old pheasant or a hare without you settin’ foot past that farmer’s “No Trespassin’” sign. Won’t yer, Fritz, eh?’

The whittling kid stood up. Everyone round the fire watched.

He tossed me a heavy lump. I caught it.

The lump was rubber, once part of a tractor tyre, maybe. He’d carved it into a head the size of a grapefruit. Sort of voodooish, but amazing. A gallery like my mum’s would snap it up, I reckon. Its eyes’re spacey and sockety. Its mouth’s this gaping scar. Its nostrils’re flared, like a terrified horse’s. If fear was a thing and not a feeling, it’d be this head.

‘Jimmy,’ Alan Wall studied it, ‘yer best ever.’

Jimmy the Whittler made a pleased noise.

‘Quite an honour,’ the woman told me. ‘Jimmy don’t make them for every gorgio who falls into our camp, yer know.’

‘Thanks,’ I told Jimmy. ‘I’ll keep it.’

Jimmy hid behind his mop of hair.

‘Is it him, Jimmy?’ Clem Ostler meant me. ‘When he came a-tumblin’ down? This is what he looked like when he fell?’

But Jimmy’d walked off behind the trailer.

I looked at Knife Grinder. ‘Can I go?’

Knife Grinder held up his palms. ‘Y’ain’t a prisoner.’

‘But you just tell them,’ Alan Wall pointed towards the village, ‘we ain’t all the thieves an’ that they say we are.’

‘The boy could preach till he’s purple,’ the daughter told him. ‘They’d not believe him. They’d not want to believe him.’

The gypsies turn to me, as if Jason Taylor is the ambassador of the land of brick houses and mesh fences and estate agents. ‘They’re scared of you. They don’t understand you, you’re right. If they could just...Or...It’d be a start if they could just sit here. Get warm, round your fire, and just listen to you. That’d be a start.’

The fire spat fat sparks up at pines lining the quarry, up at the moon.

‘Know what fire is?’ Knife Grinder’s cough’s a dying man’s cough. ‘Fire’s the sun, unwindin’ itself out o’ the wood.’

Goose Fair

That ace song ‘Olive’s Salami’ by Elvis Costello and the Attractions drowned out whatever Dean yelled at me, so I yelled back, ‘What was that?’ Dean yelled back, ‘Can’t hear a word yer sayin’!’ but then the fairground man tapped him on his shoulder for his 10p. That’s when I saw a matt square on the scratched rink, right by my dodgem.

The matt square was a wallet. I’d’ve handed it in to the fairground man but it flipped open to show a photo of Ross Wilcox and Dawn Madden. Posed like John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John on the Grease poster. (Instead of sunny America, mind, it was a cloudy back garden down Wellington Gardens.)

Ross Wilcox's wallet was stuffed with notes. There had to be fifty quid in there. This was serious. More money than I've ever had. Putting the wallet between my knees, I looked round to check nobody'd seen. Dean was yelling whatever it was at Floyd Chaceley now. None of the kids in the queue was paying me any attention.

The prosecution (a) pointed out it wasn't my money and (b) considered the panic Ross Wilcox'd feel when he discovers he's lost all this money. The defence produced (a) the dissected mouse head in my pencil case, (b) the drawings of me eating my dick on blackboards and (c) the never-ending Hey, Maggot? How's the s-s-s-sssssspeech therapy going, Maggot?

The judge arrived at his verdict in seconds. I stuffed Ross Wilcox's wallet in my pocket. I'd count my new fortune later.

The dodgem man waved at his slave in a booth, who pulled a lever, and every kid in the bumper rink went At last! Sparks blossomed off the tops of the poles as the dodgem cars wheezed into electric life and Elvis Costello turned into Spandau Ballet and dazzling oranges, lemons and limes lit up. Moran banged me a beaut from the side, howling like the Green Goblin decking Spiderman. I twisted my wheel to get him back, but I bumped Clive Pike instead. Clive Pike tried to get me back and it went on like that, swerving, eddying and ramming for five minutes of heaven. Just as the power died and every kid in the bumper rink went Not already! a Wonderwoman dodgem bashed into me. 'Oops.' Holly Deblin, at its wheel, laughed. 'I'll get you back for that,' I called to her. 'Oh,' Holly Deblin shouted back, 'poor me.' Wilcox's wallet was snug against my thigh. Bumper cars're ace, just ace.

‘Yer know why yer barred!’ By the out-gate, the fairground man was snarling at Ross Wilcox by the in-gate. With him was Dawn Madden in lizard jeans and a furry neck thing. She crumpled a stick of Wrigley’s Spearmint into her bitter-cherry mouth. ‘So drop the “What’ve I done?” bollocks!’

‘It’s got to be on the rink!’ Ross Wilcox in despair was a glorious sight.
‘It’s got to be!’

‘If yer jump from car to car stuff’s gonna fall out! Not that I give a toss if yer ’lectricute yerself but I do give a toss about my licence!’

‘Just let us look!’ Dawn Madden tried. ‘His dad’ll murder him!’

‘Oh, and I care, do I?’

‘Thirty seconds!’ Wilcox was hysterical. ‘That’s all I’m askin’!’

‘An’ I’m tellin’ yer I ain’t fannyin’ about fer the likes o’ you when I got a business to run!’

The fairground man’s slave’d counted in another bunch of kids by now. His master clanged the gate shut, missing Wilcox’s fingers by a tenth of a second. ‘Whoops!’ Black Swan Green’s hardest third-year looked round for allies in his hour of need. There was nobody he knew. The Goose Fair brings people from Tewkesbury and Malvern and Pershore, from miles around.

Dawn Madden touched Ross Wilcox’s arm.

Wilcox slapped her hand off and turned away.

Hurt Dawn Madden said something to Wilcox.

Wilcox snapped, ‘Yes it is the end of the world, yer dozy cow!’

You just don't talk to Dawn Madden like that. She looked away for a moment, scalded. Then she gave Wilcox a crushing whack on the eye. Just watching, me and Dean jumped.

'Ouch!' said Dean, delighted.

Ross Wilcox sort of crumpled in shock.

'I warned yer, yer knob-head!' Dawn Madden was fangs and claws and screaming fury. 'I warned yer! Yer can find yerself a real dozy cow!'

Ross Wilcox's hesitant fingers went to his pounded eye.

'I'm chuckin' yer!' Dawn Madden turned and walked.

Ross Wilcox cried after her, 'DAWN!', like a man in a film.

Dawn Madden turned round, fired Wilcox a twenty-thousand-volt 'Fuck off!' Then the crowds swallowed her up.

'That'll be one doozy of a shiner,' Dean remarked, 'will that.'

Wilcox looked at us and his wallet in my pocket shrieked at its master to rescue it, but he didn't even see us. He ran after his ex-girlfriend for a few frantic paces. Stopped. Turned. Checked his eye, for blood, I s'pose. Turned. Then a black hole between a Captain Ecstatic's Zero Gravity Dome and the Win-A-Smurf stall sucked Ross Wilcox in.

'Oh, my heart's bleedin'.' Dean sighed, happily. 'Gospel. Let's go find Kelly. I promised we'd look after Maxine for a bit.'

Passing the SCORE-LESS-THAN-20-WITH-3-DARTS-AND-PICK-ANY-PRIZE! darts stall someone called out, ‘Oy! Oy, Deaf-aid!’ It was Alan Wall. ‘Remember me? And my Uncle Clem?’

“Course I do. What’re you doing here?”

‘Who d’you think runs fairs?’

‘Gypsies?’

‘Mercy Watts’s people own all of this. Have for years.’

Dean was pretty impressed.

‘This is Dean and his little sister Maxine.’

Alan Wall just nodded at Dean. Clem Ostler solemnly presented Maxine with a shiny windmill. Dean told her, ‘Say thank you, then.’ Maxine did, and blew on her windmill. Alan Wall asked, ‘Fancy yerself as a bit of an Eric Bristow, then, eh?’

‘Mr One-hundred-and-eighty,’ said Dean, ‘that’s what they call me.’ He slid two 10ps from his pocket over the counter. ‘One for me, one for Jace.’

But Clem Ostler slid the coins back. ‘Never refuse a gift off of a gypsy, boys. Or yer balls’ll shrivel up. Ain’t jokin’. Drop off, in the worst cases.’

Dean got an 8 on his first throw, a 10 on his second. His third throw blew it with a double 16. I was just about to take my throw when a voice stopped me. ‘Aw, looking after baby sister, are we?’

Gary Drake, with Ant Little and Darren Croome.

Moran sort of flinched. Maxine sort of wilted.

Stick your darts, urged Unborn Twin, into their eyeballs.

‘Yeah. We are. What the fuck is it to you?’

Gary Drake wasn’t expecting that. (Words are what you fight with but what you fight about is whether or not you’re afraid of them.) ‘Go on, then.’ Gary Drake recovered quick. ‘Throw. Amaze us.’

If I threw it’d look like I was obeying him. If I didn’t I’d just look like a total wally. All I could do was try to blank Gary Drake out. My strategy was to aim at treble 20 so carefully that I’d end up missing a fraction and getting a 1 or 5. My first dart got a 5. Quickly, before Gary Drake could put me off, I threw again and got a double 5.

My last dart was a clean 1.

Clem Ostler did a fairground shout. ‘A winner!’

‘Oh, right!’ Ant Little jeered. ‘A born winner!’

‘Born laughing-stock.’ Darren Croome snorted his sinuses clear.

‘You lot had five goes yerselves earlier,’ Clem Ostler told him. ‘Cacked it up every single time, didn’t yer?’

Gary Drake didn’t quite dare tell a man who worked in a fair to piss off. Fairground worker laws aren’t quite the same.

‘You choose the prize, Max,’ I told Dean’s sister. ‘If you want.’

Maxine looked at Dean. Dean nodded back. ‘If Jace says so.’

‘Shame you can’t win any friends here, Taylor.’ Gary Drake couldn’t walk off without the last insult.

‘I don’t need many.’

‘Many?’ His sarcasm’s thick as toilet bleach. ‘Any.’

‘No, I’ve got enough.’

‘Oh, yeah,’ snided Ant Little, ‘like who exactly? Apart from Moron Bum-chum?’

If your words’re true, they’re armed. ‘No one you’d know.’

‘Y-y-yeah, T-t-t-Taylor,’ Gary Drake resorted to a stutter joke, ‘that’s ’cause your m-m-m-mates are all in your f-f-f-fuckin’ head!’

Ant Little and Darren Croome dutifully snorted.

If I got into a scrap with Gary Drake I’d probably lose it.

If I retreated I’d lose too.

But sometimes an outside force just shows up. ‘A kid who does speed-wankin’ contests,’ Alan Wall looked sort of sideways at Gary Drake, ‘in Strensham’s barn up the bridleway ain’t got no business labelin’ anyone “bum-chum”. Don’t yer think?’

All of us, even Maxine, stared at Gary Drake.

‘You,’ Gary Drake shot back, ‘whoever you are, are so full of shit!'

Skinny Clem Ostler cackled like a fat old woman.

““Full of shit”?” Alan Wall was only one year older than us, but he could beat Gary Drake into a Gary Drake omelette. ‘Come here and say that.’

‘You were seeing things! I’ve never been to Strensham’s barn!’

‘Oh, yer dead right these yots’ve been seein’ things!’ Alan Wall tapped his temples. ‘I seen you an’ that lanky git from Birtsmorton one evenin’ two weeks ago, sittin’ in the hay-loft above the Herefordshire milkers—’

‘We were drunk! It was just for a laugh! I’m not listening,’ Gary Drake backed off, ‘to some fucking gyp—’

Alan Wall leapt over the stall. Before his feet hit the turf Gary Drake’d fled. ‘You two his mates?’ Alan Wall advanced on Ant Little and Darren

Croome. ‘Are yer?’

Ant Little and Darren Croome stepped back, like you’d back away from a trotting leopard. ‘Not specially...’

‘The cuddly ET?’ Maxine stood on her tiptoes and pointed. ‘Can I have the cuddly ET?’

'My dad,' said Clem Ostler, 'called himself "Red Rex" in prizefightin' circles. Weren't redhaired, weren't polit'cal, he just liked the sound of it. Red Rex was the Goose Fair's fighter. The bones o' more than forty years ago, this'd be. Things was rougher an' leaner back then. My family'd follow Mercy Watts's old man gaff-catchin' round the Vale of Evesham, down the Severn Valley, tradin' horses with other Romanies an' farmers an' breeders an' that. Usually a bit o' money floatin' round the fairs, so the men'd feel flush 'nough for a punt or two on a fight. A nearby barn'd be found, lookouts posted for gavvas if we couldn't pay 'em off, an' my dad'd challenge all comers. Dad weren't the beefiest of his six brothers, but that was why, see, men'd bet stupid vonga, wads of it, on deckin' him or on gettin' first blood. Dad weren't much to look at. But I'm tellin' yer, Red Rex soaked up punches like a boulder! Slipp'rier than shit through a goose. No gloves in them days, mind! Bare-knuckle fightin', it were. My first memories was of watchin' Dad fight. These days those prizefighters'd be professional heavyweights or riot police or somethin', but times was diff'rent. Now, one winter' (fresh screams from the Flying Teacups ride drowned Clem Ostler out for a moment) 'one winter, word reached us 'bout this gigantic Welsh bastard. Monster of a man, serious, six foot eight, six nine, from Anglesey. That was his name'n all. Say "Anglesey" that year, an' everyone'd know who yer meant. Fightin' his way east, they said, rakin' it in, just by smashin' prizefighters' skulls to eggshells. One blacksmith, name of McMahon, in Cheshire, died after half a round with Anglesey. 'Nother needed iron plates put in his skull, three or four climbed into the ring fit men an' were carried out cripples for life. Anglesey'd been mounthin' on how he'd hunt down Red Rex at the Goose Fair, right here, in Black Swan Green. Pulp him, skin him, string him up, smoke him, sell him to the pig farmers. Sure 'nough, when we got to our old atchin'-sen down Pig Lane, Anglesey's people was there. Wouldn't budge till after the fight. Twenty guineas was the prize money! Last man standin'd scoop the lot. Unheard of, back then, that sort o' money.'

'What did yer dad do?' asked Dean.

'No prizefighter can turn an' run an' no gypsy can either. Reputation's everythin'. My uncles clubbed round for the stake money, but Dad weren't havin' it. Instead, he arranged with Anglesey to gamble every last stick we owned. Everythin'! Trailer – our home, remember? – the Crown Derby, the beds, the dogs, the fleas on the dogs, the lot. Lose that fight an' we'd be on our arses. Nowhere to go, nowhere to sleep, nothin' to eat.'

I asked, 'What happened?'

'Anglesey couldn't resist it! Floorin' Red Rex and cleanin' him out! The night o' the fight the barn was packed. Gypsies'd come from Dorset, Kent, half of Wales. What a fight that was! Tellin' yer. What a fight. Bax an' us older 'uns, we still remember it, blow by blow. Dad an' Anglesey pounded each other to jam. Them clowns yer get boxin' on the telly, with their gloves an' their doctors an' their referees, they'd've run screamin' from the punishment Anglesey an' Dad dealt each other. Bits hangin' off Dad, there was. He could hardly see. But I'm tellin' yer. Dad gave as good as he got. Floor o' that barn was redder'n a slaughterhouse. Right at the end, the punches'd stopped. It was all they could do just to stand. At last, Dad swayed up to Anglesey, raised his left hand 'cause his right was so busted, and did this...' Clem Ostler placed his forefinger between my eyes and pushed me, so gently I hardly felt it. 'Down that Welsh juk went! Like a tree. Wham! That was the state they was in. Dad quit fightin' that night. He had to. Too badly busted up. Took his vonga an' bought a carnival ride. By an' by he became the Goose Fair's chief Toberman, so he did all right. Last time we spoke was down Chepstow way, in the crocus-tan, in hospital. Just a couple o' days b'fore he died. Lungs'd flooded out so bad he kept coughin' up bits. So I asked Dad, why'd he done it? Why'd he bet his family's trailer instead o' just money?'

Dean and I stared back, waiting for the answer.

"Son, if I'd just been fightin' for the vonga, for the money," he told me, "that Welsh bastard'd've beat me." Fightin' just for money weren't enough. Dad knew it. Only by fightin' for everythin' he loved, see, me, my mum, his family, our home, the lot, only then could Dad take the pain. So yer see what that says? Yer see what I'm sayin'?"

The sea of people washed me and Dean up outside the Black Swan, where Mr Broadwas and two pissed wurzels with black teeth and a grinning disease were perched on three stone mushrooms. Dean looked at his dad's cup a bit nervously.

'Coffee, son!' Dean's dad held his cup so Dean could see in it. 'From my flask! Good an' hot, for a night like this.' He turned to Mr Broadwas. 'The missus's got him well trained.'

'Good,' Mr Broadwas speaks as slowly as plants, 'for both of you.'

'So how long,' Isaac Pye pushed by, lugging a crate of beers from a van, 'we staying on the wagon this time, then, Frank Moran?'

'Ain't gettin' off of it.' Dean's dad didn't smile back.

'Leopards changing their spots, is it?'

'I ain't talkin' 'bout spots, Isaac Pye. Talkin' about drink. For them as're all well and good with alcohol, alcohol's all well and good. But for me, it's an illness. Doctor just told me what I already knowed. Ain't had a drop since April.'

'Oh, aye? Since April, this time, is it?'

'Yeah.' Dean's dad scowled at the publican. 'April.'

'If yer say so,' Isaac Pye edged past into his pub, 'if yer say so. But yer can't bring beverages from outside on to my premises.'

'No fear of that, Isaac Pye!' Dean's dad yelled, as if the louder he yelled it, the truer it'd be. 'No fear of that!'

Halls of mirrors're usually crummy affairs with only Fattypuffs and Thinifers mirrors. But these mirrors melted you to self-mutants. Spotlights brightened and blackened the room. I was alone. Alone as you can be, that is, in a hall of mirrors. I got out Wilcox's wallet to count the money, but decided to wait till I was somewhere safer. 'Maxine?' I called out. 'You here?'

I left to carry on the search, but as I moved an African tribesman with a neck giraffed by iron rings waded towards me from the depths of the first mirror. His ears were droopy and dripping. It was a dreamish sight. Can a person change, asked the tribesman, into another person?

'You're right. That's the question.'

I thought I heard a scuffle.

'Maxine? Come out, Maxine! This isn't funny!'

In the second mirror was a gelatinous cube. All face, no body, just twiggy limbs waving at its corners. By puffing out my cheeks I nearly doubled its size. No, answered the cube. You can only change superficial features. An Inside You must stay unaltered to change the Outside You. To change Inside You you'd need an Even More Inside You, who'd need an Inside the Even More Inside You to change it. And on and on. You with me?

'I'm with you.'

An invisible bird brushed my ear.

'Maxine? This isn't funny, Maxine.'

In the third mirror was Maggot. My waist and legs got squidged into a tail. My chest and head flared up into a big shimmering glob. Don't listen to them. Ross Wilcox and Gary Drake and Neal Brose pick on us because you don't blend in. If you had the right hair and clothes and spoke the right way

and hung out with the right people, things'd be fine. Popularity's about following weather forecasts.

‘I’ve always wondered what you looked like.’

Mirror four held Upside-down Jason Taylor. What good’s Maggot ever done you? At Miss Throckmorton’s I used to imagine people in the southern hemisphere walking round like this. A jerk of my leg moved my mirror arm. Flap my arm, my mirror leg flapped. How about an Outside You, suggested Upside-down Me, who is your Inside You too? A One You? If people like your One You, great. If they don’t, tough. Trying to win approval for your Outside You is a drag, Jason. That’s what makes you weak. It’s boring.

‘Boring.’ I agreed with Upside-down Me. ‘Boring. Boring.’

‘I’m not bored!’ A furry ET leapt out at me.

I experienced a cardiac arrest in the hall of mirrors.

‘Loonies talk to themselves.’ Maxine frowned. ‘Are you a loony?’

Kelly Moran chatted to Debby Crombie by the toffee apple stall. As, surely, the richest kid in the Three Counties, I bought one for me, Dean and Maxine. Biting into toffee-armoured apples requires technique. Your teeth bounce off. Bash the hard toffee against your fangs, that's the only way. Then sink your incisors in to prise off the crust of toffee.

Debby Crombie looks like she's got a rugby ball up her jumper. The whole village knows she's pregnant with Tom Yew's baby. 'That ET's never real,' she said to Maxine, 'is it?'

'It is real,' said Maxine. 'It's name's Geoffrey.'

'Geoffrey the ET. Stylish.'

'Thanks.'

'Bit o' news to warm the cockles of yer hearts.' Kelly turned to Dean and me. 'Angela Bullock heard from Dawn Madden herself that she's not only chucked your old mate Loverboy Wilcox—'

Dean clucked. 'We saw 'em have a massive barney earlier!'

'But listen, this is even better,' a squeak of pleasure escaped Kelly, 'Wilcox's lost his wallet, right, with hundreds of quid in it!'

(A mile-long neon Chinese dragon wove through the Goose Fair and bit my jeans pocket. Luckily, no one else saw it.)

'Hundreds of quid?' Dean gaped, literally. 'Where'd he lose it?'

'Here! Now! In the Goose Fair! Of course, Diana Turbot couldn't keep a secret to save her life, so half the village're truffling round looking for it right now. Probably been found already. But who's goin' to hand all that money back to an arsey turd like Ross Wilcox?'

'Half of Black Swan Green,' Dean answered, 'is in his gang.'

‘That doesn’t mean they like him.’

‘How come’ (my voice felt wobbly) ‘Wilcox was walking about with hundreds of pounds on him?’

‘Well, isn’t that a tale o’ woe! Apparently your mate Ross was at his old man’s garage after school when this car pulls up, right. Knock, knock, it’s the Inland Revenue. Gordon Wilcox’s years behind on his tax. Last time they visited he chased ’em off with a blow-torch, but this time they’d brought a copper from Upton. But before they can knock on his office, right, Gordon Wilcox whips open the safe and hands Wilcox Junior everythin’ in it to spirit off home. Out of sight, out of accounts, like. Big mistake! Wilcox hung on to it, didn’t he? Thought he’d impress his girlfriend with, shall we say, eh, Debs, the thickness of his wad? Maybe he meant to siphon a bit off. Maybe he didn’t. We’ll never know, ’cause it’s vanished.’

‘So what’s Wilcox doin’ now?’

‘He was sat smoking in the bus shack, last Angela Bullock heard.’

‘Must be shittin’ bricks,’ said Debby Crombie. ‘Gordon Wilcox’s sick in the head. Vicious.’

‘How d’you mean?’ I’d never spoken to Debby Crombie till tonight.
“Vicious”?’

‘You do know,’ Kelly jumped in, ‘why Ross Wilcox’s mum left?’

She realized her son was pure evil? ‘Why?’

‘She lost a strip of postage stamps.’

‘Postage stamps?’

‘One strip of five second-class postage stamps. They was the straw what broke the camel’s back. Honest to God, Jason, Gordon Wilcox beat that woman so black and blue, the hospital had to feed her through a tube for a week.’

‘Why didn’t,’ a black hole just got bigger, ‘he get sent to prison?’

‘No witnesses, a crafty lawyer who said she’d chucked herself downstairs over and over, plus his wife conveniently going mental. “Unsound mind”, the judge in Worcester decided.’

‘So if he’d do that,’ Debby Crombie clutched her rugby ball, ‘over a strip of stamps, imagine what he’ll do over hundreds of pounds! Sure, Ross Wilcox is a nasty piece of work, but you wouldn’t wish a maulin’ off of Gordon Wilcox on your worst enemy.’

Dean'd gone yahoooooooooooooing down Ali Baba's Helter Skelter ahead of me. Just as I got my mat ready fireworks erupted in the sky over towards Welland. Guy Fawkes' Night's not till tomorrow, but they can't wait in Welland. Stalks climbed, then pop-blossomed into slow-slow-slow...motion Michaelmas daisies. Raining-silvers, purples, phoenix golds. Crunkly booms arrived a second late...boom...boom...Firework petals fell away and faded to ash. Only five or six big ones went off, but what beauts they were.

No footsteps were clomping up the stairs of the tower.

Still perched on the lip of the slide, I got out Wilcox's wallet to count Wilcox's money. My money. The notes weren't fivers, nor tenners, they were all twenty-pound notes. I've never even touched a twenty. Five of them, I counted, ten of them, fifteen of them...

Thirty Queen Elizabeths. Starlight pale.

SIX – I screamed – HUNDRED – silently – POUNDS.

If anyone found out, anyone, things'd get grimmer than I dared imagine. I'd wrap the notes in polythene, put them in a sandwich box and stash them away. Somewhere in the wood'd be safest. And it'd be safest to wang the wallet into the Severn. Shame. All I have in the way of a wallet is a zippy pouch thing. I sniffed Wilcox's wallet so atoms from his wallet'll turn into me. If only I could breathe in Dawn Madden atoms.

The Goose Fair's literally magic, I thought, sitting there. It turns my weakness into power. It turns our village green into this underwater kingdom. 'Ghost Town' by the Specials bubbled up from the Magic Mountain, 'Waterloo' by Abba from the Flying Teacups, the Pink Panther music from the Chair-o-Plane. The Black Swan was so full its innards were spilling out. Farther off, villages floated on empty spaces, where wide fields were. Hanley Castle, Blackmore End, Brotheridge Green. Worcester was a galaxy squashed flat.

Best of all? I'd be pounding Wilcox into a pulp. Me. Via his dad. Why should I feel bad about that? After what Wilcox's done to me. Neither of them'd ever know it. It's the perfect revenge. Besides, Kelly exaggerates. No father'd beat up his own son that badly.

Footsteps came up the tower. I hastily stuffed my fortune into my pocket, repositioned myself on the scratchy mat and a wonderful thought slid into my head as I slid off the lip. Six hundred pounds could buy an Omega Seamaster.

Grand Master of the Helter Skelter, tonight I leant into the curves.

'Hey,' said Dean, as the crowds swept us by Fryer Tuck's Chip Emporium, 'that's never yer dad, is it?'

Can't be, I thought, but it was. Still in his Columbo overcoat and suit from the office. He had this ironed-in frown and I thought how he needed a very long holiday. Dad was eating chips with a wooden fork from a cone of newspaper. There're dreams where the right people appear in wrong places and this was like that. Dad spotted us before I could work out why I wanted to dodge off. 'Hullo, you two.'

'Evening,' Dean sounded nervous, 'Mr Taylor.' They haven't met since the Mr Blake affair back in June.

'Good to see you, Dean. How's your arm?'

'Yes, thanks.' Dean wiggled his arm. 'Right as rain.'

'I'm very pleased to hear it.'

'Hi, Dad.' I don't know why I was nervous too. 'What're you doing here?'

'Didn't know I needed your permission to come, Jason.'

'No, no, I didn't mean that...'

Dad tried to smile but he just looked pained. 'I know, I know. What am I doing here?' Dad forked a chip and blew on it. 'Well, I was driving home. Saw all the hullabaloo.' Dad's voice was somehow different. Softer. 'Couldn't very well miss the Goose Fair, could I? I'll have a little wander, I thought. Smelt these.' Dad waggled his cone. 'Y'know, after eleven years in Black Swan Green this is my first time at the Goose Fair. I kept meaning to bring you and Julia when you were little. But something important always got in the way. So important, I've got no idea what it was.'

‘Oh. Mum phoned, from Cheltenham. To tell me to tell you there’s a cold quiche in the fridge. I left you a note on the kitchen table.’

‘Very thoughtful of you. Thanks.’ Dad gazed inside his cone as if answers might be written there. ‘Hey, have you eaten? Dean? Fancy anything from Fryer Tuck’s Chip Emporium?’

‘I ate a sandwich and a black-cherry yogurt.’ I didn’t mention the toffee apple in case it counted as throwing money away. ‘Before I came.’

‘I had three o’ Fryer Tuck’s All-American Taste-Tastic Hot Dogs.’ Dean patted his stomach. ‘Recommend ’em highly, I do.’

‘Good,’ Dad squeezed his head like he had a headache, ‘good. Oh. Let me give you a little, uh...’ Dad slipped two new pound coins into my hand. (One hour before, two pounds’d’ve been loads. Now it’s less than 1/300th of my entire estate.)

‘Thanks, Dad. Would you like to...uh...?’

‘I’d love to, but I have paperwork coming out of my paperwork. Plans to plan. Hotties to put in beds. No rest for the wicked. Good seeing you, Dean. Jason’s got a telly in his room, doubtless he hasn’t shut up about it. Come over and watch it! No point it just...y’know...sitting there...’

‘Thanks very much, Mr Taylor.’

Dad dropped the cone into an oil drum full of rubbish and walked off.

Suppose, prompted Unborn Twin, you never see him again?

‘Dad!’

I ran up to him and looked him square in the eye. Suddenly, I’m nearly as tall as he is. ‘I want to be a forester when I’m older.’ I hadn’t meant to tell him. Dad always finds problems with plans.

‘A forester?’

‘Yeah,’ I nodded, ‘someone who looks after forests.’

‘Mmm.’ That was the closest he came to smiling. ‘There’s kind of a big clue in the word, Jason.’

‘Well. Yeah. One of those. In France. Maybe.’

‘You’ll have to study hard.’ Dad made a could do worse face. ‘You’ll need the sciences.’

‘Then I’ll get the sciences.’

‘I know.’

I’ll always remember meeting Dad tonight. I know I will. Will Dad? Or will, for Dad, tonight’s Goose Fair just be one more of the trillion things you even forget forgetting?

‘What’s all this,’ asked Moran, ‘about a portable TV?’

‘It only works if you hold its aerial, which means you’re too close to watch it. Wait here a mo, will you? Just off to the wood for a waz.’

As I jogged over the village green, the Goose Fair slid off and fell away. Six hundred pounds: 6,000 Mars Bars, 110 LPs, 1,200 paperbacks, 5 Raleigh Grifters, 1 4 of a Mini, 3 Atari Home Entertainment consoles. Clothes that'll make Dawn Madden dance with me at the Christmas village hall disco. Docs and denim jackets. Thin leather ties with pianos on them. Salmon-pink shirts. An Omega Seamaster de Ville made by snowy-haired Swiss craftsmen in 1950.

The old bus shack was just a box of black.

I told you, said Maggot. He's not here. Go back now. You tried.

The black smelt of fresh cigarettes. ‘Wilcox?’

‘Fuck off.’ Wilcox struck a match and his face hovered there for one flickery second. The marks under his nose might’ve been cleaned-up blood.

‘Just found something.’

‘And why d’yer s’pose,’ Wilcox didn’t get it, ‘I give a flying fuck?’

“Cause it’s yours.”

His voice lurched like a dog on its lead. ‘What?’

I dug out his wallet and held it towards him.

Wilcox leapt up and snatched it off me. ‘Where?’

‘Dodgems.’

Wilcox thought about ripping my throat out. ‘When?’

‘Few minutes ago. Sort of wedged down the edge of the rink.’

‘If yer’ve taken any of this money, Taylor,’ Wilcox’s fingers trembled as he took out the wodge of £20 notes, ‘yer fuckin’ dead!’

‘No, really, don’t mention it, Ross. No, honest, you’d’ve done the same for me, I know you would.’ Ross Wilcox was too busy counting to really listen. ‘Look, if I was going to steal any of it, I’d hardly be here giving it back to you, would I?’

Wilcox got to thirty. He took a deep breath, then remembered me, witnessing his utter relief. ‘So now I’m s’posed to kiss yer arse, am I?’ His face snarled up. ‘Tell yer how grateful I am?’

As usual, I didn’t know how to reply to him.

The poor kid.

The fairground man on the Great Silvestro's Flying Teacups locked the padded bars that'd stop me, Dean, Floyd Chaceley and Clive Pike being flung halfway to Orion. 'So are you,' Dean asked him, a bit sarkily, 'the Great Silvestro?'

'Nah. Silvestro died last month. His other ride, Flying Saucers, went and collapsed on him. Made all newspapers up in Derby, where it happened. Nine lads about your age, plus Silvestro – crushed, mangled, pitted, juiced.' The fairground man shook his head, wincing. 'The only way the police could sort out who was what was by calling in a team of dentists. Dentists with ladles and buckets. Guess why the ride collapsed. You'll never guess. One single bolt hadn't been tightened proper. One bolt. Casual labour, see. Pay peanuts, get monkeys. Right. That's the last of you done.'

He waved at an assistant, who pulled a big lever. A song that went 'Hey! (HEY!) You! (YOU!) Get Off Of My Cloud!' blasted out and hydraulic tentacles lifted our giant teacups higher than houses. Floyd Chacely, Clive Pike and Dean Moran and me did a rising oooooohhhhh!

My hand touched my flat pocket. Apart from £28 in my TSB account, all the money I had left in the world was the two pounds Dad'd given me. Perhaps giving Wilcox back his wallet had been idiotic, but at least now I could stop worrying about whether I should or not.

The Great Silvestro's Flying Teacups swung into motion and an orchestra of screams tuned up. My memories're all sloshed out of order. The Goose Fair was sluiced from a bowl of starry dark. Clive Pike, to my left, eyes beetling bigger than humanly possible, G-force ribbling his face. ('HEY! HEY!') Starry dark, sluiced from a bowl of the Goose Fair. Floyd Chaceley, who never smiles, on my right, laughing like Lord Satan in a mushroom cloud. Screams chasing their tails as fast as the melting tigers in Little Black Sambo. ('YOU! YOU!') Goose Fair and November night propellering one into another. Courage is being scared shitless but doing it anyway. Dean Moran, opposite, eyes clenched, lips valving open as a cobra slithers out, a shiny cobra of half-digested toffee apple, candy floss and

three of Fryer Tuck's All-American Taste-Tastic Hot Dogs, highly recommended, writhing longer. ('GET OFF OF MY CLOUD!') That such a volume of food could still be uncoiling from Dean's stomach is supernaturally peculiar, missing my face by inches, climbing higher, till it lunges and turns into a billion globs of puke, bulleting passengers of the late Great Silvestro's Flying Teacups (now they've really got something to scream about) and a thousand and one innocent civilians milling at the wrong time in the wrong part of the Goose Fair.

The giant machine groaned like the Iron Man as our teacup sank earthwards. Our heads slowed more slowly. People were still screaming, even half the village green away, which seemed to me a bit much.

'Gonads,' stated the fairground man, seeing the state of our teacup. 'Shrivelled, syphilitic gonads. Ern!' he yelled at his assistant. 'Ern! Bring the mop! We've got a puker!'

It took a few seconds to realize the screams weren't coming from near by, but from farther off. By the crossroads, over by Mr Rhydd's.

Ross Wilcox must've marched back to the Goose Fair to find Dawn Madden right after I'd left him. (Dean's sister Kelly filled in these missing pieces. She heard this bit from Andrea Bozard, who'd nearly got mown down by Wilcox as he passed by.) Ross Wilcox must've felt as saved as he'd just felt damned, I s'pose. Like Jesus, rolling the stone from his tomb when everyone'd thought he was a goner. 'Sure, Dad,' he'd be able to say, 'here's yer money. I kept it on me in case the pigs raided our house, like.' First he'd find Dawn Madden, agree he'd been a dick-head, seal his apology with a fondling snog, and his world'd be the right way up again. Round the time me and Dean were being fastened into Silvestro's teacup, Wilcox asked Lucy Sneads if she'd seen Dawn Madden. Lucy Sneads, who can be a nasty piece of work if the mood takes her, and who has some portion of responsibility for what happened next, helpfully told him. 'Over there. In that Land Rover. Under the oak.' Only two people'd've seen Ross Wilcox's face, lit bright by Mary Poppins' Merry-Go-Round, when he unpopped the flap on the back. One was Dawn Madden herself, her legs wrapped round the other witness. Grant Burch. Ross Wilcox, I imagine, gawped at the couple like a seal gawping at a seal-clubber. Ruth Redmarley told Kelly she saw Wilcox slam the Land Rover flap shut, howling 'BITCH!' over and over and banging the Land Rover with his fist. It must've hurt. Ruth Redmarley watched him then jump on Grant Burch's brother's Suzuki (the same scrambler that used to be Tom Yew's), turn the keys, keys which Grant Burch'd left in the ignition 'cause it was right by the jeep (nobody'd steal it from under his nose, right?), and kick it into life. If Ross Wilcox hadn't grown up around motorbikes 'cause of his dad and brother, it probably wouldn't've occurred to him to nick the Suzuki. If it hadn't started first time, even on a cold November night, Grant Burch might've managed to get his trousers on in time to stop what happened. Robin South reckons he saw Tom Yew on the back of the Suzuki as Wilcox fraped it over the village green, but Robin South's so full of crap it's untrue. Avril Bredon says she saw the Suzuki hit the muddy bit by the main road at about fifty miles per hour, and you can believe Avril Bredon. The police believed her. The bike slid round so the back faced front, clipped the Boer war memorial, and Ross Wilcox got cartwheeled over the crossroads. Two girls from the Chase comprehensive were phoning their dads from the phone box by Mr Rhydd's. We won't know their names till next week's

Malvern Gazetteer's out. But the last person to see Ross Wilcox was Arthur Evesham's widow, on her way home from bingo at the village hall. Ross Wilcox came bowling by and missed her by inches. She's the one who knelt down by Ross Wilcox to see if he was dead or alive, the one who heard him grunt, 'I think I lost a trainer,' sputter out a bagful of blood and teeth, and garble, 'Make sure no one nicks my trainer.' Arthur Evesham's widow's the one who first saw Wilcox's right leg stopped at his knee, looked back, and saw gobby smears streaking the road. She's being helped into the second ambulance right now. See her face? Stony hollow in the flashing blue light?

Disco

Rule One is Blank out the consequences. Ignore this rule and you'll hesitate, botch it and be caught like Steve McQueen on barbed wire in *The Great Escape*. That's why, in metalwork this morning, I focused on Mr Murcot's birthmarks like my life depended on it. He's got two long ones on his throat in the shape of New Zealand. 'Top of the morning, boys!' Our teacher crashed his cymbals. 'God save the Queen!'

'The top of the morning, Mr Murcot,' we chanted, turning towards Buckingham Palace and saluting, 'and God save the Queen!'

Neal Brose, standing by the vice he shares with Gary Drake, stared back at me. Don't think I've forgotten, his eyes told me, Maggot.

'Projectwards, boys.' Half the class're girls but Mr Murcot always calls us 'boys' unless he's bollocking us. Then we're all 'girls'. 'Today's the final class of 1982. Fail to finish your projects today, and it's transportation to the colonies for the terms of your natural lives.' Our project this term was to design and make some sort of a scraper. Mine's to clean between the studs on my football boots.

I let about ten minutes go by, till Neal Brose was busy on the drill.

My heart pumped fast, but I'd made up my mind.

From Neal Brose's black Slazenger bag I took out his Casio College Solar-powered Mathematical Calculator. It's the most expensive calculator in WH Smith. A dark suction pulled me on, almost reassuringly, like a canoeist paddling straight at Niagara Falls instead of trying to fight the current. I took the prized calculator out of its special case.

Holly Deblin'd noticed me. She was tying back her hair to stop it getting caught in the lathe. (Mr Murcot enjoys going over the hideous face-first deaths he's witnessed over the years.) I think she likes us, whispered Unborn Twin. Blow her a kiss.

I put Neal Brose's calculator into the vice. Leon Cutler'd noticed too but just stared, not believing it. Blank out the consequences. I gave the rod-handle thing a strong turn. Tiny pleas snapped in the calculator's casing. Then I put all my weight on the rod thing. Gary Drake's skeleton, Neal Brose's skull, Wayne Nashend's backbone, their futures, their souls. Harder. The casing shattered, circuitry crunched, shrapnel tittered on the floor as the ten-millimetre-thick calculator turned into a three-millimetre-thick calculator. There. Powderized. Shouting'd broken out all over the metalwork room.

Rule Two is Do it until it's undoable.

Those're the only two rules you need to remember.

Giddy glorious waterfalls, down I went.

‘Mr Kempsey informs me,’ Mr Nixon laced his fingers into a mace, ‘that your father recently lost his job.’

‘Lost’. Like a job’s a wallet you’ll lose if you’re careless. I hadn’t breathed a word at school. But yes, it’s true. Dad’d got to his office in Oxford at 8.55 a.m., and by 9.15 a.m. a security guard was escorting him off the premises. ‘We must tighten our belts,’ says Margaret Thatcher, though she isn’t, not personally. ‘There is no alternative.’ Greenland Supermarkets sacked Dad ’cause an expense account was £20 short. After eleven years. This way, Mum’d told Aunt Alice on the phone, they don’t have to pay Dad a penny in redundancy money. Danny Lawlor’d helped Craig Salt to stitch him up, she added. The Danny Lawlor I met last August was dead nice. But niceness isn’t goodness, I ’spose. Now he’s driving Dad’s company Rover 3500.

‘Jason!’ barked Mr Kempsey.

‘Oh.’ Yes, I was in a silo of shit. ‘Sir?’

‘Mr Nixon asked you a question.’

‘Yes. Dad was sacked on Goose Fair day. Uh...some weeks ago.’

‘A misfortune.’ Mr Nixon has a vivisector’s eyes. ‘But misfortunes are commonplace, Taylor, and relative. Look at the misfortune Nick Yew has endured this year. Or Ross Wilcox. How is destroying your class-mate’s property going to help your father?’

‘It won’t, sir.’ The bad-kid’s chair was so low Mr Nixon might just as well saw off its legs completely. ‘Destroying Brose’s calculator hasn’t got a thing to do with my dad getting sacked, sir.’

‘Then what,’ Mr Nixon reangled his head, ‘was it to do with?’

Do it until it’s undoable.

‘Brose’s “popularity lessons”, sir.’

Mr Nixon looked at Mr Kempsey for an explanation.

‘Neal Brose?’ Mr Kempsey cleared his throat, at a loss. “Popularity lessons”?’

‘Brose’ (Hangman blocked ‘Neal’ but that was okay) ‘ordered me, Floyd Chaceley, Nicholas Briar and Clive Pike to pay him a pound a week for popularity lessons. I said no. So he got Wayne Nashend and Ant Little to show me what’ll happen if I don’t get more “popularity”.’

‘What manner,’ Mr Nixon’s voice hardened, a good sign, ‘of persuasion do you claim these boys employed?’

There was no need to exaggerate. ‘Monday they emptied my bag down the stairs by the chemistry lab. Tuesday I got pelted with clumps of soil in Mr Carver’s PE lesson. In the cloakroom this morning Brose and Little and Wayne Nashend told me that I’ll get my face kicked in on my way home tonight.’

‘You’re saying,’ Mr Kempsey’s temperature rose nicely, ‘that Neal Brose is running some sort of extortion racket? Under my very nose?’

‘Does “extortion” mean’ (I knew perfectly well) ‘beating someone up if they don’t give you money, sir?’

Mr Kempsey thought the sun, moon and stars shone out of Neal Brose’s arse. ‘That would be one definition.’ All the teachers do. ‘Do you have evidence for this?’

‘What sort of evidence’ (Let guile be your ally) ‘do you have in mind, sir?’ Things were running enough in my favour for me to add, with a straight face, ‘Hidden microphones?’

‘Well...’

‘If we interview Chaceley and Pike and Briar,’ Mr Nixon took over, ‘will they confirm your story?’

‘It depends on who they’re most afraid of, sir. You or Brose.’

‘I promise you, Taylor, they will be most afraid of me.’

‘Casting aspersions on a boy’s character is a very serious act, Taylor.’ Mr Kempsey wasn’t yet convinced.

‘I’m glad to hear you say so, sir.’

‘What I am not glad about,’ Mr Nixon wasn’t letting an interrogation get pally, ‘is that you brought this matter to my attention, not by knocking on my door and telling me, but by destroying the property of your alleged persecutor.’

That ‘alleged’ warned me the jury was still out.

‘Involving a teacher means you’re a grass, sir.’

‘Not involving a teacher means you’re an ass, Taylor.’

Maggot’d’ve buckled under the unfairness of it all.

‘I hadn’t thought this far ahead.’ Just find what’s true, hold it up and take the consequences without whining. ‘I had to show Brose I’m not afraid of him. That’s all I thought of.’

If boredom had a smell, it'd be the stationery storeroom. Dust, paper, warm pipes, all day, all winter. Blank exercise books on metal shelves. Piles of To Kill a Mockingbird, of Romeo and Juliet, of Moonfleet. The storeroom's also an isolation cell in drawn-out cases like mine. Apart from a square of frosted glass in the door, the only light's a brown bulb. Mr Kempsey'd told me, curtly, to get on with my homework till I was sent for, but for once I was up to date. A poem inside kicked my belly. Since I was in so much shit already, I nicked a nice exercise book with stiff covers off a shelf to write in. But after the first line I realized it wasn't a poem. More of a...what? A confession, I s'pose. It began, and on it went. When the bell went for morning break I found I'd filled three sides. Fitting words together makes time go through narrower pipes but faster. Shadows passed the frosted-glass window as teachers rushed to the staffroom to smoke and drink coffee. Joking, moaning shadows. Nobody came into the storeroom to get me. The entire third year'd be talking about what I'd done in metalwork, I knew. The whole school. People say your ears burn when people's talking about you, but I get a hum in the cellar of my stomach. Jason Taylor, he didn't, Jason Taylor, he did, oh my God really he grassed who off? Writing buries this hum. The bell went for the end of break and the shadows passed by in the other direction. Still nobody came. In the outside world Mr Nixon'd be summoning my parents. He wouldn't have much luck till tonight. Dad'd gone to Oxford to meet 'contacts' about a new job. Even Dad's reel-to-reel answering machine's been sent back to Greenland. Through the wall the school Xerox machine was droning, droning, droning.

"That ace song 'Oliver's Salami'
by Elvis Costello and the
Attractions drowned out whatever
Dean yelled at me, so I yelled
back, "What was that?" Dean
yelled back, "Can't hear a word
you're saying!" But then, the
fairground man tapped him on
his shoulder for his 10p. That's
when I saw a matt square on
the scratched rink,

A twitch of fear lunged when the door open but I trampled it dead. It was just a pair of second-year squirts, sent to get a pile of Cider with Rosie. (We read it last year too. One scene gave every boy in the classroom boners you could actually hear growing.) ‘Is it true, Taylor?’ The larger squirt addressed me like I was still in my Maggot period.

‘What the fuck is that,’ I replied, after a pause, ‘to you?’

I managed to say it so evilly the second-year spilt his books. The smaller squirt spilt his books too as he bent down to help.

I clapped, dead slow.

‘What appals me, 3KM,’ Mr Kempsey’s nickname may be ‘Polly’ but he’s dangerous when he’s this angry, ‘is that these acts of intimidation have been going on for weeks. Weeks.’

3KM hid behind a funeral silence.

‘WEEKS!’

3KM jumped.

‘And not one of you thought to come to me! I feel sickened. Sickened and scared. Yes, scared. In five years you’re going to have the vote! You are supposed to be the elite, 3KM. What kind of citizens are you going to make? What kind of police officers? Teachers? Lawyers? Judges? “I knew it was wrong but it wasn’t my business, sir.” “Better to let someone else blow the whistle, sir.” “I was afraid if I said anything, I’d be next, sir.” Well, if this spinelessness is the future of British society, heaven help us.’

I, Jason Taylor, am a grass.

‘Now I strongly disapprove of how Taylor brought this woeful business to my attention, but at least he did. Less impressive are Chaceley, Pike and Briar, who only spoke up under duress. What is to your collective shame is that it took Taylor’s rash act this morning to force events to a head.’

Every kid in front’d turned round to look at me, but it was Gary Drake I went for. ‘What is it, Gary?’ (Hangman’d handed me a free pass for the afternoon. I sometimes think Hangman wants to come to one of Mrs de Roo’s ‘working accommodations’, too.) ‘Don’t you know what I look like after three years?’

The eyes switched to Gary Drake. Then to Mr Kempsey. Our form teacher should have opened fire on me for talking while he was talking. But he didn’t. ‘Well, Drake?’

‘Sir?’

‘Feigned incomprehension is the last resort of the fool, Drake.’

Gary Drake actually looked awkward. ‘Sir?’

‘You’re doing it again, Drake.’

Gary Drake nicely stamped on. Wayne Nashend and Ant Little suspended. Chances are, Mr Nixon’s going to expel Neal Brose.

Now they’ll really want to kick my face in.

Neal Brose normally sits up front in English, slap bang in the middle. Go on, said Unborn Twin, take the bastard's seat. You owe it him. So I did. David Ockeridge, who sits next to Neal Brose, chose a seat farther back. But Clive Pike, of all people, put his bag next to me. 'Anyone sitting here?' Clive Pike's breath smells of cheese'n'onion Outer Spacers, but who cares?

I made a Go ahead face.

Miss Lippetts shot me a look as we chanted, 'Good afternoon, Miss Lippetts.' So swift and crafty it was almost not there, but it was. 'Sit down, 3KM. Pencil cases out, please. Today, we'll exercise our supple young minds on a composition, on this theme...' As we got our stuff out, Miss Lippetts wrote on the board.

A SECRET.

The slap and slide of chalk's a reassuring sound.

'Tamsin, do me the honour, please.'

Tamsin Murrell read, ““A secret”, miss.”

'Thank you. But what is a secret?'

It takes everyone a bit of time to get going after lunch.

'Well, say, is a secret a thing you can see? Touch?'

Avril Bredon put her hand up.

'Avril?'

'A secret's a piece of information that not everybody knows.'

'Good. A piece of information that not everyone knows. Information about...who? You? Somebody else? Something? All of these?'

After a gap, a few kids murmured, 'All of these.'

'Yes, I'd say so too. But ask yourselves this. Is a secret a secret if it isn't true?'

That was a tight knot of a question. Miss Lippetts wrote,

MISS LIPPETTS IS NANCY REAGAN.

Most of the girls laughed.

‘If I asked you to stay behind after class, waited till we were alone and then whispered, in all seriousness, this statement, would you go, “No! Really! Wow! What a secret!” Duncan?’

Duncan Priest had his hand up. ‘I’d phone Little Malvern Loonybin, miss. Book you a room with a nice mattress. On all the walls.’ Duncan Priest’s small fan club laughed. ‘That’s not a secret, miss! It’s just the gibberish of an utter nutter.’

‘A pithy and rhyming assessment, thank you. As Duncan says, so-called “secrets” that are palpably false cannot be considered secrets. If enough people believed I was Nancy Reagan, that might cause me problems, but we still couldn’t really think of it as a “secret”, could we? More of a mass delusion. Can anyone tell me what a mass delusion is? Alastair?’

‘I heard loads of Americans think Elvis Presley is still alive.’

‘Fine example. However, I’m now going to let you in on a secret about myself which is true. It’s a touch embarrassing, so please don’t spread it around at break-time...’

MISS LIPPETTS IS AN AXE-MURDERER.

Now half the boys laughed too.

‘Shhh! I buried my victims under the M50. So there’s no evidence. No suspicion. But is this secret still a secret? If it’s one that nobody, and I mean nobody, has the faintest suspicion about?’

An interested silence played itself out.

‘Yes...’ muttered a few kids as a few kids muttered, ‘No...’

‘You’d know, miss.’ Clive Pike raised his hand. ‘If you really were an axe-murderer. So you can’t say nobody knows it.’

‘Not if Miss was a schizophrenic axe-murderer,’ Duncan Priest told him. ‘Who never remembers the crimes she commits. She might just...turn, like that, chop you to bits for forgetting your homework, whack splurt splatter, flush the remains down the sewers, black out, then wake up again as mild-mannered Miss Lippetts, English teacher, go, “Gosh, blood on my clothes again? How odd that this keeps happening whenever there’s a full moon. Oh well. Into the washing machine.” Then it would be a secret nobody knew, right?’

‘Delicious imagery, Duncan, thank you. But imagine all the murders to have ever occurred in the Severn Valley, since, say, Roman times. All those victims, all those murderers, dead and turned to dust. Can those violent acts, which no one, remember, has thought about for a thousand years, also be called “secrets”? Holly?’

‘Not secrets, miss,’ said Holly Deblin. ‘Just...lost information.’

‘Sure. So can we agree, a secret needs a human agency to know it, or at least write it down? A holder. A keeper. Emma Ramping! What are you whispering to Abigail?’

‘Miss?’

‘Stand up, please, Emma.’

Worried, lanky Emma Ramping stood up.

‘I’m conducting a lesson here. What are you telling Abigail?’

Emma Ramping hid behind a very sorry face.

‘Is it a piece of information that not everybody knows?’

‘Yes, miss.’

‘Speak up, Emma, so the groundlings can hear you!’

‘Yes, miss.’

‘Aha. So you were confiding a secret to Abigail?’

Emma Ramping reluctantly nodded.

‘How topical. Well, why not share this secret with us? Now. In a nice loud voice.’

Emma Ramping began blushing, miserably.

‘I’ll do you a deal, Emma. I’ll let you off the hook if you just explain why you’re happy sharing your secret with Abigail, but not the rest of us.’

‘Because...I don’t want everyone to know, miss.’

‘Emma is telling us something about secrets, 3KM. Thank you, Emma, be seated and sin no more. How do you kill a secret?’

Leon Cutler stuck up his hand. ‘Tell people.’

‘Yes, Leon. But how many people? Emma told Abigail her secret, but that didn’t kill it, did it? How many people have to be in the know before the secret’s an ex-secret?’

‘Enough,’ Duncan Priest said, ‘to get you sent to the electric chair, miss. For being an axe-murderer, I mean.’

‘Who can reconstruct Duncan’s glorious wit into a general principle? How many people does it take to kill a secret? David?’

‘As many,’ David Ockeridge thought about it, ‘as it takes, miss.’

‘As it takes to do what? Avril?’

‘As it takes to change,’ Avril Bredon frowned, ‘whatever it is the secret’s about. Miss.’

‘Solid reasoning, 3KM. Maybe the future is in safe hands, after all. If Emma told us what she told Abigail, that secret would be dead. If my murders are exposed in the Malvern Gazetteer, I’m...well, dead, if Duncan’s on the jury, anyway. The scale is different, but the principle is the same. Now, my next question is the one that truly intrigues me because I’m not sure what the answer is. Which secrets should be made public? And which shouldn’t?’

That question had no quick takers.

For the fiftieth or hundredth time that day I thought of Ross Wilcox.

‘Who can tell me what this word means?’

ETHICS

Chalk mist falls in the wakes of words.

I'd looked 'ethics' up once. It crops up in the Chronicles of Thomas Covenant books. It means morality. Mark Badbury already had his hand up.

'Mark?'

'The answer's in what you just said, miss. Ethics is to do with what you should and shouldn't do.'

'Very smart answer, Mark. In Socrates' Greece they would have considered you a fine rhetorician. Is it ethical to get every secret out in the open?'

Duncan Priest cleared his throat. 'Seems pretty ethical to get your secret out in the open, miss. To stop innocent schoolkids being chopped up.'

'Spot on, Duncan. But would you spill the beans on this one?'

BATMAN'S REAL NAME IS BRUCE WAYNE

Most of the boys in the class let out murmurs of admiration.

‘If this secret gets out, what is every master criminal in the world going to do? Christopher?’

‘Blow Bruce Wayne’s mansion to smithereens, miss.’ Christopher Twyford sighed. ‘No more Caped Crusader.’

‘Which would be a loss to society at large, yes? So sometimes it’s ethical not to reveal a secret. Nicholas?’

‘Like the Official Secrets Act.’ Nicholas Briar usually doesn’t say a word in class. ‘When the Falklands War was on.’

‘Just so, Nicholas. Loose lips sink ships. Now. Think about your own secrets.’ (The connection between Ross Wilcox’s wallet and his lost leg. My grandfather’s smashed-up Omega Seamaster. Madame Crommelynck.) ‘How quiet it has suddenly become. Right, are all your secrets of the “Yes, I Should Tell” or “No, I shouldn’t Tell” varieties? Or is there a third category that, ethically speaking, is not so clear cut? Personal secrets that don’t affect anyone else? Trivial ones? Complex ones, with uncertain consequences if you tell them?’

Mumbled Yeses, growing in strength.

Miss Lippetts got a fresh stick from a box of chalk. ‘You acquire more of these ambiguous secrets as you age, 3KM. Not less. Get used to them. Who can guess why I’m writing this word...’

REPUTATION

‘Jason?’

3KM turned into a radiotelescope aimed at the class grass.

‘Reputation is what gets damaged, miss, once a secret’s out. Your reputation as a teacher’d be shot to bits, if it’s proved you are an axe-murderer. Bruce Wayne’s reputation as this wouldn’t-say-boo-to-a-goose Mr Nobody’d be done for. It’s like Neal Brose, too, isn’t it?’ (If I can grind a solar-powered calculator to bits then stuff this rule that I should be ashamed for grassing on a kid and getting him expelled. In fact stuff all rules.) ‘He had quite a secret going, didn’t he? Wayne Nashend knew, Anthony Little knew. A few others.’ Gary Drake, over to my left, stared straight ahead. ‘But once his secret is out, his reputation as this...’

To everyone’s surprise, Miss Lippetts suggested, ‘Golden boy?’

‘Golden boy. Excellent term, Miss Lippetts.’ (For the first time in God knows how long I earnt some class laughs.) ‘That reputation’s wrecked. His reputation with kids as this...hard-knock you don’t mess with is wrecked too. Without a reputation to hide his secret behind, Neal Brose is...totally...completely...’

Say it, nudged Unborn Twin, I dare you to.

‘...buggered, miss. Screwed and buggered.’

That appalled silence was my handiwork. Words made it. Just words.

Miss Lippetts loves her job, on good days.

My mind was scratching itself raw over how Mum and Dad'll react to what I did today, so I got the Christmas tree out of its cupboard as a distraction. The Quality Street tin of decorations too. December 20th's here and Mum and Dad've hardly mentioned Christmas. Mum's at the gallery seven days a week and Dad keeps going off for interviews that only lead to more interviews. I put the tree together, and strung its fairy lights. When I was a kid Dad'd buy real trees from Gilbert Swinyard's dad. Mum got this artificial one from Debenham's in Worcester two years ago. I whinged that it didn't smell of anything, but she pointed out I wasn't the one who had to hoover and unpick the needles from the carpet. Which I s'pose's fair enough. Most of the decorations are older than me. Even the tissue paper they're wrapped in's ancient. Frosted baubles Mum and Dad bought for their first (and last) Christmas alone together, without Julia or me. A tin choirboy hitting a high note, his mouth a perfect o. A wooden family of jolly snowmen. (Everything wasn't made of plastic in those days.) The fattest Father Christmas in Lapland. Precious Angel, from Mum's mum's mum. Precious Angel's made of blown glass – she was a gift to my great-grandmother from a one-eyed Hungarian prince, so the story goes, at a ball, in Vienna, just before the First World War.

Step on her, said Unborn Twin. She'd crunch like a Crunchie.

No bloody way, I told Unborn Twin.

The phone rang.

‘Hello?’

Clunks and grundlings. ‘Jace? Julia. Long time no speak.’

‘You sound like you’re in a blizzard.’

‘Call me back. I’m out of coins.’

I dialled the number. The line was better.

‘Cheers. No blizzards yet, but it’s freezing up here. Is Mum there?’

‘No. She’s still at the gallery.’

‘Oh...’

Joy Division throbbed in the background.

‘What is it?’

‘Absolutely nothing.’

‘Absolutely nothing’ is always something. ‘What, Julia?’

‘Nah...nothing. When I got back to halls this morning, there was a message from Mum, that’s all. Did she phone me yesterday evening?’

‘Could’ve done. What was the message?’

‘Phone home immediately, it said. But our avuncular super-efficient porter – not – didn’t write the time of the call. I phoned the gallery at lunch-time, but Agnes told me Mum’s gone to her solicitor’s. Phoned again, but she hadn’t got back. So I thought I’d phone you. But there’s no need to worry.’

‘Solicitors?’

‘Just be business stuff. Is Dad in?’

‘He’s doing interviews in Oxford.’

‘Right. Good. Sure. He’s...y’know, keeping up okay?’

‘Oh...okay. He’s not locked himself in his office again, anyway. Last weekend he made a bonfire of Greenland files in the garden. Dean and me helped. Poured petrol on! It was like The Towering Inferno. Then this week Craig Salt’s lawyer told Dad a delivery man was coming that afternoon to collect all the computer gear, and that if Dad didn’t cooperate they’d sue.’

‘What did Dad do?’

‘When the van pulled up, Dad dropped the hard drive out of my bedroom window.’

‘But that’s the first floor.’

‘I know, and you should’ve heard the monitor smash! He told the delivery bloke, “Give Craig Salt my compliments!”’

‘Jesus! Worm turns, or what?’

‘He’s been decorating, too. Your bedroom was first on the hit list.’

‘Yeah, Mum said.’

‘Do you mind?’

‘Well, no. It’s not like I wanted them to preserve it for ever like a shrine to Julia or anything. Brings it home to you sharpish, though. “Right, you’re eighteen years old, off you go. Drop by the care home in about thirty years, if you’re passing.” Oh, ignore me, Jace, I’m being morbid.’

‘You’re still coming home for Christmas, right?’

‘Day after tomorrow. Stian’s driving me down. His family own this mansion in darkest Dorset.’

‘Stan?’

‘No, Stian. He’s Norwegian, PhD in dolphin language? Didn’t I mention him in my last letter?’

Julia knows exactly what she ‘mentions’ in her letters.

‘Wow. So he speaks in dolphin with you?’

‘He programs computers that might, one day soon.’

‘What happened to Ewan?’

‘Ewan’s a dear, but he’s in Durham and I’m up here and...well, I knocked it on the head. In the long run, it’s for the best.’

‘Oh.’ But Ewan had a silver MG. ‘I liked Ewan.’

‘Cheer up. Stian’s got a Porsche.’

‘God, Julia. What sort? A GT?’

‘I don’t know! A black one. So what’re we getting for Christmas?’

‘Tube of Smarties.’ Dusty family joke. ‘Actually, I haven’t looked.’

‘Right! You always go on prezziie hunts.’

‘Honest, I haven’t. Record tokens and book tokens, most like. I haven’t asked for anything. ’Cause of...y’know, Dad’s job. And they haven’t asked me. Anyway, who used to play your Christmas LPs in November and make me stand sentry in case they came back from shopping?’

‘Remember that time you didn’t? They caught me and Kate dressed in Mum’s old wedding gear dancing to “Knowing Me, Knowing You”. Speaking of which, has the accept-no-imitations Black Swan Green Grand Christmas Village Hall Disco already come and gone?’

‘Starts in about an hour.’

‘Going with anyone?’

‘Dean Moran’s going. A few kids from my class.’

‘Oy! I told you about my love-life.’

Talking about girls with Julia’s still pretty new. ‘That’s ’cause you have a love-life. I did sort of fancy this one girl, but she’s...’ (helping the love of her life learn to walk with a plastic leg) ‘...she’s not interested.’

‘Her loss. Poor you.’

‘Odd thing is, I saw her at school last week, and, it’s weird, but...’

‘Your crush had evaporated?’

‘Yeah. Into thin air. How does that happen?’

‘Ah, search me, little brother. Search Aristophanes. Search Dante. Search Shakespeare. Search Burt Bacharach.’

‘Actually, I might not even go to the disco.’

‘Why not?’

Because I got Ant Little and Wayne Nashend suspended and Neal Brose expelled today and chances are they’ll be there.

‘I’m not feeling that Christmassy this year.’

‘Nonsense! Go! Shoes, not trainers. Polish them. Those black jeans we bought you in Regent’s Arcade. And that V-neck mustard sweater, if it’s clean. Plain white T-shirt underneath. Logos are naff. Nothing pastel, nothing sporty. Definitely not that yucko piano tie. Tiny bit of Dad’s Givenchy round your gills. Not Brut. Brut’s as sexy as Fairy Liquid. Nick some of Mum’s mousse and stick your fringe up a bit so you don’t look like a cub. Dance your socks off, and may the bluebird of happiness fly up your nose.’

‘Okay.’ Brose and Little and Nashend’ll win if I don’t. ‘Bossy.’

‘What use is an unbossy lawyer? Look, there’s a queue for the phone. Tell Mum I called. Say I’ll keep checking the message board this evening. Till late.’

The bruising cold wind shoved me along, every step bringing the class grass nearer to Brose, Nashend and Little. Past Miss Throckmorton's, the village hall floated in the arctic dark, a lit-up ark. Its windows were stained disco colours. Michael Fish said the area of low pressure moving over the British Isles is coming from the Urals. The Urals're the USSR's Colorado Rockies. Intercontinental missile silos and fall-out shelters're sunk deep in the roots of the mountains. There're research cities so secret they've got no names and don't appear on maps. Strange to think of a Red Army sentry on a barbed-wire watchtower shivering in this very same icy wind. Oxygen he'd breathed out might be oxygen I breathed in.

Julia'd spun out that conversation to distract me from something.

Pluto Noak, Gilbert Swinyard and Pete Redmarley stood in the hallway. I'm really not their favourite person since they chucked me out of Spooks the day after they let me in. They don't pick on me, they just act like I don't exist. Which is normally fine. But tonight this even older kid was with them. Stubbly, grim, brown leather jacket, All Blacks rugby shirt. Pluto Noak tapped him and pointed at me. A flock of girls behind me blocked off my escape route but the rugby kid'd already ploughed right up to me. 'This is him?'

'Aye!' Pluto Noak caught up. 'That's him.'

The hallway went very quiet.

'News for you.' He gripped my coat so tight seams ripped. He throbbed with loathing. 'You picked on the wrong kid today,' his front teeth didn't part as he spoke, only his lips twitched, 'you knobless, gobless, gutless, spineless, brainless, arseless, dickless, shitless, witless, pissless, bollockless piece of—'

'Josh,' Pluto Noak clutched the kid's arm, 'Josh! This ain't Neal Brose. This is Taylor.'

This kid Josh glared at Pluto Noak. 'This isn't Neal Brose?'

'No. Taylor.'

Leaning against the door of the bogs, Pete Redmarley flicked a Minstrel into the air, and caught it in his mouth.

'This,' Josh glared at Pete Redmarley, 'is that Taylor?'

Pete Redmarley crunched his Minstrel. 'Uh-huh.'

'You're the Taylor,' Josh let go of my coat, 'who grassed on those little midget Kray twins who were squeezing my brother for money?'

‘Who’s,’ my voice cracked, ‘who’s your brother?’

‘Floyd Chaceley.’

Mild Floyd Chaceley has one holy ghost of a big brother.

‘Then I’m that Taylor, yeah.’

‘Well.’ Josh patted my coat smooth. ‘Well done you, That Taylor. But if any one of you lot,’ everyone in the hallway shrank under his evil eye, ‘knows this Brose or Little or Nashend, tell ’em I’m here. Tell ’em I’m waiting, now. Tell ’em I want words.’

Inside the village hall proper, a few kids were already dancing to ‘Video Killed The Radio Star’. Most of the boys’d drifted to one side, too cool to dance. Most of the girls’d drifted to the other, too cool to dance too. Discos’re tricky. You look a total wally if you dance too early but after one crucial song tips the disco over, you look a sad saddo if you don’t. Dean was talking to Floyd Chaceley by the hatch where they sell sweets and cans of drink. ‘Just met your brother,’ I told him. ‘Jesus. Wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of him.’

‘Stepbrother.’ Thanks to me, Floyd’d spent the morning in Nixon’s office giving evidence against Neal Brose. For all I knew Floyd hated me. ‘Yeah, he’s all right. Should’ve seen him earlier. Threatening to set Brose’s house on fire.’

I envied Floyd, having already squared the day with his mum and dad.

‘Don’t reckon Nashend or Little’ll be showing up tonight, neither.’ Dean appeared by my side and offered me his Curly-Wurly to bite a bit off of. Floyd bought me a Pepsi. ‘Look at Andrea Bozard!’ Dean pointed at the same girl who used to pretend to be a pony at Miss Throckmorton’s and make nests using acorns as eggs. ‘In that ra-ra skirt.’

Floyd asked, ‘What about her?’

‘Lush?’ Dean did a panting-doggy face. ‘Or what?’

‘Frigging In The Rigging’ by the Sex Pistols came on and the Upton Punks pogoed up the front. Oswald Wyre’s older brother Steve head-butted the wall so Philip Phelps’s dad drove him to Worcester Hospital in case he fell into a coma. But it got some of the boys dancing (sort of) so next the DJ put on ‘Prince Charming’ by Adam and the Ants. ‘Prince Charming’ has this special dance that Adam Ant does in the video. You all line up and make an X with your wrists in the air as you pace along to the music. But everyone wanted to be Adam Ant, who does it one step ahead of his pack, so the line got faster and faster up and down the village hall till kids were virtually sprinting. Next was ‘The Lunatics (Have Taken Over The Asylum)’ by Fun Boy Three. It’s undanceable to, unless you’re Squelch. Maybe Squelch heard a secret rhythm nobody else heard.

Robin South called out, ‘Squelch, yer spazzer!’

Squelch didn’t even notice nobody else was dancing.

Secrets affect you more than you’d think. You lie to keep them hidden. You steer talk away from them. You worry someone’ll discover yours and tell the world. You think you are in charge of the secret, but isn’t it the secret that’s using you? S’pose lunatics mould their doctors, more than doctors mould their lunatics?

In the bogs was Gary Drake.

Once I'd've frozen, but not after a day like today.

'All right?' Gary Drake said. Once he'd've sneered a comment about me not being able to find my dick. But suddenly I'm popular enough for Gary Drake to give an 'All right?'

December cold streamed in through the window.

The boredest tilt of my head told Gary Drake, Yeah.

Cigarette butts bobbed in the yellow river of steaming piss.

‘Do The Locomotion’ got all the girls doing this choo-choo dance in a snaky line. Then there was ‘Oops Upside Your Head’ that’s got a sort of rowing-boat dance to it. It’s not a dance for boys. ‘House Of Fun’ by Madness is, though. ‘House Of Fun’ is about buying condoms but the BBC didn’t ban it soon enough ’cause the BBC only spot secret meanings weeks after the dimmest duh-brain in Duffershire’s got it. Squelch did this electrocuted dance that more kids copied to take the piss at first but actually it worked. (There’s a Squelch hiding in all great inventors.) Then ‘Once In A Lifetime’ by Talking Heads came on. That was the crucial song that made it more bonzoish not to dance than to dance, so now me and Dean and Floyd did. The DJ switched the strobe light on. Only for short bursts, ’cause strobes make your brain blow up. Dancing’s like walking down a busy high street or millions of other things. You’re absolutely fine as long as you don’t think about it. During the strobe storm, through a stormy night forest of necks and arms, I saw Holly Deblin. Holly Deblin’s got a sort of Indian goddess dance, swaying but sort of flicking her hands. Holly Deblin might’ve seen me through her stormy night forest, ’cause she might’ve smiled. (Might isn’t as good as did but it’s miles better than didn’t.) Next was ‘I Feel Love’ by Donna Summer. John Tookey showed off this new New York craze called break-dancing but went spinning out of control into a group of girls who toppled like skittles. He had to be rescued by his mates from stabbing female heels. During Bryan Ferry’s ‘Jealous Guy’ Lee Biggs got off with Angela Bullock. They snogged in the corner and Duncan Priest stood right by them and did his imitation of a cow giving birth. But the laughs were envious too. Angela Bullock wears black bras. Then, during ‘To Cut A Long Story Short’ by Spandau Ballet, Alastair Nurton got off with Tracey Impney, this giant Goth from Brotheridge Green. Gary Numan and Tubeway Army’s ‘Are “Friends” Electric?’ came on and Colin Pole and Mark Badbury did this glazed-robot dance. ‘This song’s ace!’ Dean yelled in my ear. ‘It’s so futuristic. Gary Numan’s got a friend named “Five”! Is that brill or what?’ Dancing’s a brain the dancers’re only cells of. Dancers think they’re in charge but they’re obeying ancient orders. ‘Three Times A Lady’ by the Commodores cleared the floor ’cept for boyfriends and girlfriends who smooched, enjoying being looked at, and snoggers who just snogged and forgot they were being looked at. Second choices were going for the third choices now. Paul White got off with Lucy Sneads. Next on

was ‘Come On Eileen’ by Dexys Midnight Runners. A disco’s a zoo too. Some of the animals’re wilder than they are by day, some funnier, some posier, some shyer, some sexier. Holly Deblin’d obviously gone home.

‘I thought you’d gone home.’

An EXIT sign glowed alien-green in the dark.

‘I thought you’d gone home.’

The disco vibrated the plywood floor. Behind the stage there’s this narrow back room stacked with stacks of chairs. It’s got a sort of big shelf too, ten foot up and as wide as the back room. The table-tennis table-tops’re kept up there and I know where the ladder’s hidden.

‘No. I was just dancing with Dean Moran.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Holly Deblin did this funny jealous voice. ‘What’s Dean Moran got that I haven’t? Is he a good kisser?’

‘Moran? That’s revolting!’

‘Revolting’ was the last word I ever spoke as someone who’d never kissed a girl. I’d always worried but kissing’s not so tricky. Your lips know what to do, just like sea anemones know what to do. Kissing spins you, like Flying Teacups. Oxygen the girl breathes out, you breathe in.

But your teeth can clunk, something chronic.

‘Whoops,’ Holly Deblin drew back, ‘sorry!’

‘That’s okay. I can glue them back in.’

Holly Deblin twizzled my moussed hair. The skin round her neck’s the softest thing I’ve ever stroked. And she let me. That’s the amazing bit. She let me. Perfume counters in department stores, Holly Deblin smells of, the middle of July, and cinnamon Tic-Tacs. My cousin Hugo reckons he’s kissed thirty girls (and not only kissed) and he’s probably up to fifty by now, but you can only have one first one.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘I nicked some mistletoe. Look.’

‘It’s all squashy and—’

During my second ever kiss Holly Deblin’s tongue visited my mouth, like a shy vole. You’d think that’d be disgustingsville too but it’s wet and secret and mine wanted to visit hers back so I let it. That kiss ended ’cause I’d forgotten to breathe. ‘This song,’ I was actually panting, ‘that’s on right now. Sort of hippyish, but it’s beautiful.’

Words like ‘beautiful’ you can’t use with boys you can with girls.

““#9dream”. John Lennon. Walls and Bridges LP, 1974.”

‘If that’s s’posed to impress me, it really does.’

‘My brother works at Revolver Records. His LP collection stretches to Mars and back. So how d’you know about this little hidey-hole?’

‘This back room? Used to come to youth club here, to play table tennis. I thought it’d be locked tonight. But I was wrong, obviously.’

‘Obviously.’ Holly Deblin’s hands slid under my jumper. Years of hearing Julia and Kate Alfrick talk about wandering hands warned me off doing the same. Then Holly Deblin sort of shivered. I thought she might be cold, but she sort of giggled.

‘What?’ I was scared I’d done something wrong. ‘What?’

‘Neal Brose’s face, in metalwork, this morning.’

‘Oh. That. This morning’s one big blur. The whole day is.’

‘Gary Drake got him off the drill, right, and pointed at what you were doing. Brose didn’t get it at first. That thing you were annihilating in the vice was actually his calculator. Then, then, he got it. He’s a smarmy bastard but he’s not stupid. He saw what’d happen next, and next, and next. He knew he was stuffed. Right at that moment, he knew.’

I toyed with Holly Deblin’s clacky beads.

She said, ‘I was pretty surprised, too.’

I didn’t hurry her.

‘I mean, I liked you, Taylor, but I thought you were...’ She didn’t want to say anything that might hurt my feelings.

‘A human punchbag?’

Holly Deblin propped her chin on my chest. ‘Yeah.’ Her chin dug in a bit. ‘What happened, Taylor? To you, I mean.’

‘Stuff.’ Her calling me ‘Taylor’ feels closer than ‘Jason’. I’m still too shy to call her anything. ‘The year. Look, I don’t want to talk about Neal Brose. Another time?’ I slipped off this woven band she wore round her wrist and slipped it over mine.

‘Thief. Get your own top-of-the-range fashion accessories.’

‘I am doing. This one’s the first in my collection.’

Holly Deblin gripped my slightly big ears in her fingers and thumbs and steered my mouth to hers. Our third kiss lasted the whole of ‘Planet Earth’ by Duran Duran. Holly Deblin guided my hand to where it could feel her fourteen-year-old heart beating against its palm.

‘Hello, Jason.’ The lounge, lit by the Christmas tree lights and the gas fire, reminded me of Santa’s grotto. The TV was off. Dad was just sitting there, so far as I could see, in the Fruit Gum dark. But the tone of his voice told me he knew all about Neal Brose and the wafered Casio. ‘Enjoy the disco?’

‘Not bad.’ (He didn’t care about the disco.) ‘How was Oxford?’

‘Oxford was Oxford. Jason, we need to have a little chat.’

I hung up my black parka on the coat-stand knowing I was a condemned man. ‘A little chat’ means I sit down and Dad lays into me, but Holly Deblin must’ve rewired my head. ‘Dad, can I start?’

‘All right.’ Dad looked calm, but volcanoes are calm just before they blow half a mountain away. ‘Go ahead.’

‘I’ve got two things to tell you. Big things, really.’

‘I can guess what one is. You had an exciting day at school, by all accounts.’

‘That’s one of them, yes.’

‘Mr Kempsey telephoned earlier. About that expelled boy.’

‘Neal Brose. Yeah. I...I’ll pay for a new calculator.’

‘No need.’ Dad was too drained to throw an eppy. ‘I’ll post his father a cheque in the morning. He telephoned too. Neal Brose’s father, I mean. He apologized to me, actually.’ (That surprised me.) ‘Asked me to forget the calculator. I’ll send the cheque anyway. If he chooses not to cash it, that’s his look out. But I think it’ll draw a line under the affair.’

‘So...’

‘Your mother might want to put in her sixpence ha’penny, but...’ Dad shrugged. ‘Mr Kempsey told me some bullying’s been going on. I’m sorry you didn’t feel you could tell us about it, but I can hardly get angry with you for that. Can I?’

Now I remembered Julia’s phone call. ‘Is Mum home?’

‘Mum’s...’ Dad’s eyes went uneasy. ‘...staying at Agnes’s tonight.’

‘In Cheltenham?’ (That didn’t make sense. Mum never stays at anyone’s ’cept Aunt Alice’s.)

‘There was a private view that went on late.’

‘She didn’t mention it at breakfast.’

‘What’s the second thing you wanted to tell me?’

This moment’d taken twelve months to whoosh here.

‘Go on, Jason. I doubt it’s as bad as you think.’

Oh yes it is. ‘I was out’ (Hangman stopped ‘skating’) ‘er...last January, when the pond in the woods froze over. Messing about with some other kids. I had Granddad’s watch on. His Omega—’ (Hangman blocked ‘Seamaster’.) Saying this in reality was more dreamlike than the dozen bad dreams I’ve had about saying it. ‘The watch he bought when he was in the’ (God, now I couldn’t say ‘navy’) ‘stationed in Aden. But, I fell over’ – I couldn’t turn back now – ‘and smashed it to pieces. Honest, I’ve spent all year trying to find a new one. But the only one I heard about cost around nine hundred pounds. And I don’t have that much money. Obviously.’

Dad’s face hadn’t twitched. Not one muscle.

‘I’m really sorry. I was an idiot to take it out.’

Any second that calm’d crack and Dad’d annihilate me.

‘Ah, it doesn’t matter.’ (But grown-ups often say exactly that exactly when it matters most.) ‘It was only a watch. Nobody got hurt, not like that poor Ross Wilcox lad. Nobody died. Be more careful with fragile things in the future, that’s all. Is there anything left of the watch?’

‘Only the strap and the casing, really.’

‘Hang on to those. Some craftsmen might be able to graft parts of another Seamaster into Granddad’s. You never know. When you’re running thousand-acre nature reserves in the Loire Valley.’

‘So you’re not going to...do anything? To me, I mean.’

Dad shrugged. ‘You’ve put yourself through the mill already.’

I’d never dared hope it’d go this well. ‘You were going to tell me something big too, Dad.’

Dad swallowed. ‘You did a lovely job of decorating the tree.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Thank you.’ Dad took a sip of his coffee, and grimaced. ‘I forgot to put in the Nutrasweet. Would you mind getting it for me from the kitchen, love?’

‘Love’? Dad hasn’t called me that in aeons. ‘Sure.’ I went into the kitchen. It was freezing in there. Relief’d made gravity a bit weaker. I got Dad’s Nutrasweet, a teaspoon and a saucer and went back to the lounge.

‘Thanks. Sit down again.’

Dad clicked a tiny capsule into his whirlpool of Nescafé, stirred it in, and picked up the cup and saucer. ‘Sometimes...’ The awkwardness after his ‘sometimes’ grew, and grew, and grew. ‘Sometimes, you can love two people in different ways at the same time.’ Just speaking, I saw, was a superhuman effort. ‘Do you understand?’

I shook my head. Dad's eyes might've given me a clue, but now he's staring down at his coffee. He's leaning forward. His elbows are resting on the coffee table. 'Your mother and I...' Dad's voice's gone horrible, like some shite actor in some shite TV soap. 'Your mother and I...' Dad's trembling. Dad doesn't tremble! The cup and saucer begin to clatter so he has to put them down, but he's hiding his eyes. 'Your mother and I...'

January Man

'Apparently, he even took out loans for her!'

Guess who Gwendolin Bendincks was talking about?

'Loans?' Mrs Rhydd actually squealed. 'Loans?'

Why should I scurry off in shame? I've done nothing wrong. Was it my fault they hadn't noticed me, browsing through Smash Hits behind a pyramid of Pedigree Chum cans?

'Loans. To the tune of twenty – thousand – pounds.'

'You could buy a small house with that! What does she need twenty thousand pounds for?'

'Polly Nurton says she has an office equipment firm or some-such in Oxford which supplies Greenland – the supermarkets, that is, not the country. Now isn't that a cosy little arrangement?'

Mrs Rhydd didn't get it.

'Mrs Rhydd, he works for Greenland as an area manager. Well, he did. He was sacked two months ago, as you know. Wouldn't surprise me to learn

there's a connection between that and this whole...carry-on. Polly Nurton isn't one to beat around the bush, as you know. She said what respectable organization wants an adulterer at the wheel? Doubtless he got her the contract with Greenland years ago, back when their...liaison began.'

'You mean they've been...for some time?'

'Oh yes! They committed their first...indiscretion years ago. He confessed to Helena at the time and swore to cut her off. Helena forgave him. For the sake of the family. One would. I mean' (people tend to whisper the word in case it brings them bad luck) "'divorce". It's a drastic step. Perhaps they didn't meet in the intervening years, perhaps they did. Polly Nurton didn't say and I'm no snoop. But once a lemon meringue's cut, no amount of tears can make it whole.'

'True, Mrs Bendincks. So very true.'

'But Polly does know this much. When her business foundered last year – shortly after her husband'd upped sticks and left her with their baby – doubtless having scented something rotten in the state of Sweden, as it were – she turned to her former beau.'

'The brass neck!'

'Last January, this was. Polly said she had some sort of a breakdown. Maybe she did, maybe she didn't. But she made nuisance calls to his house at all hours, that sort of carry-on. So, he borrowed a hill of money without so much as breathing a word to his own wife, using her family home as collateral.'

'Your heart goes out to poor Mrs Taylor, doesn't it?'

'Well, exactly! She didn't know a dicky bird until she went through his bank statements. What a way to learn your own home is in hock! Can you imagine how duped you'd feel? How betrayed? Ironic thing is, Helena's gallery in Cheltenham has people queuing round the block – Home and Country are doing a feature on it next month.'

‘If you ask me,’ steamed Mrs Rhydd, ‘she’s behaved no better than a common strump—’

Mrs Rhydd sort of puffer-fished as she caught sight of me. I put down Smash Hits and walked up to the counter. I’m getting lots of practice at acting like nothing’s wrong.

‘Hello! Jason, isn’t it?’ Gwendolin Bendincks switched on her smile at full beam. ‘You won’t remember a wrinkly like me, but we met at the vicarage, last summer.’

‘I remember you.’

‘I bet he says that to all the girls!’ (Mrs Rhydd had the decency to look mortified.) ‘So the weatherman says we’re in for a good dumping of snow tonight. You’d love that, wouldn’t you? Sledging, igloo-building, snowball fights.’

‘How are’ – Mrs Rhydd fiddled with a price gun – ‘things, my pet? You’re moving out today, aren’t you?’

‘The removal men’re loading up the heavy stuff now. Mum, my sister, Kate Alfrick and Mum’s boss are packing the last bits and pieces, so they told me to go off for a couple of hours to—’ (Hangman blocked ‘say goodbye’.)

““To bid Black Swan Green au revoir”.” Gwendolin Bendincks jumped in with a knowing smile. ‘You’ll visit us soon, won’t you? Cheltenham’s hardly the ends of the earth, is it?’

‘I guess not.’

‘You’re putting a jolly brave face on it, Jason,’ she clasped her hands like she’d trapped a grasshopper, ‘but I want to say, if Francis – the vicar, I mean – and I can be any help whatsoever, our door’s always open. Will you tell your mother that?’

‘Sure.’ I know a well you can drown yourself in. ‘Sure.’

‘Hullo, Blue,’ Mr Rhydd came from the back. ‘What’ll it be?’

‘One quarter of Rhubarb and Custards, and one of crystallized ginger.’ Crystallized ginger makes my gums sweat but Mum loves it. ‘Please.’

‘Right you are, Blue.’ Mr Rhydd climbed his ladder to the jars.

‘Cheltenham’s divine.’ Gwendolin Bendincks got back to work on me. ‘Old spa towns have such character. Is it a large place your mother’s renting, Jason?’

‘Haven’t seen it yet.’

‘And your father’s going to be based in Oxford?’ (I nodded.) ‘No luck with a new job, yet, I hear?’ (I shook my head.) ‘Firms only just back from the Christmas hols, that’s why. Still, Oxford’s hardly the ends of the earth, is it, Mrs Rhydd? Be going up to see Dad soon, will we?’

‘We...haven’t talked about it much, yet.’

‘One thing at a time, very wise. But you’ll be looking forward to a brand-new school! Like I always say. A stranger is just a friend you haven’t met yet.’ (Bollocks. I’ve never met the Yorkshire Ripper, but he wouldn’t be a friend.) ‘So, is your old house in Kingfisher Meadows officially on the market yet?’

‘Soon, I s’pose.’

‘Reason I ask is, our vicarage moved to a bungalow on the Upton road, but that was only a “stopgap”. Tell Mum to have her agent give Francis a tinkle before it’s advertised anywhere. Mum’d rather do business with a friend than with some outsider she wouldn’t know from Adam. Remember those ghastly Crommelynck characters who foisted themselves on to us? So you’ll tell her? Promise me, Jason? Scout’s honour?’

‘Sure, I promise.’ In about forty years. ‘Scout’s honour.’

‘Right you are, Blue,’ said Mr Rhydd, twirling the bags closed.

‘Thanks...’ I fished in my pockets for money.

‘No, no. On the house today.’ Mr Rhydd’s face is a swollen wreck, but a face and its look can be totally different. ‘Leaving present.’

‘Thanks.’

‘How,’ sang Gwendolin Bendincks, ‘about that!'

‘Yes,’ Mrs Rhydd said flatly, ‘how about that.’

‘Best of British.’ Mr Rhydd closed my fingers around the paper bags.
‘And ta very much.’

Black Swan Green's the Village of the Dead today 'cause Moonraker's on TV. Roger Moore's last James Bond film, they're saying. Our TV's in the back of the removal truck. I'd've gone to Dean's to watch it normally, but he and his dad're walking to White-Leaved Oak to see his gran, over Chase End way. My feet took me out towards the lake in the woods. Mr Rhydd was kind to give me the Rhubarbs and Custards for free, but today they tasted acidic and glassy. I spat mine out.

Woods in winter're brittle places.

Your mind flits from twig to twig.

Dad came to pick up the rest of his stuff yesterday. Mum'd left it in black vinyl bags in the garage 'cause she needs all the suitcases. Her and Julia were at the gallery in Cheltenham. I was sat on a packing chest watching Happy Days on my portable TV. (Until Hugo told me that Happy Days is set in the 1950s, I thought it was about America now.) An unfamiliar engine pulled up our driveway. Through the living-room window I saw this sky-blue VW Jetta. Dad got out of the passenger side.

I hadn't seen Dad since the night I kissed Holly Deblin, when he told me him and Mum were splitting up. Two whole weeks ago. We'd sort of spoken on the phone at Aunt Alice's on Christmas Day, but that was horrible, horrible, horrible. What was I s'posed to say? 'Thanks for the Advanced Meccano set and the Jean Michel Jarre LP'? (That's what I did say.) Mum and Dad didn't speak to each other, and Mum didn't ask me what he'd said.

When I saw the sky-blue VW Jetta, Maggot hissed, Scarper! Hide!

‘Hi, Dad.’

‘Oh!’ Dad’s expression was a mountaineer’s, the moment his rope snaps. ‘Jason. I didn’t expect you to—’ Dad’d been going to say ‘to be at home’ but he changed his sentence. ‘I didn’t hear you.’

‘I heard the car.’ Obviously. ‘Mum’s at work.’ Dad knew that.

‘She left some things for me. I’ve just come to pick them up.’

‘Yeah. She said.’

A moon-grey cat strolled into the garage and settled down on a cushion of potatoes.

‘So...’ Dad said. ‘How’s Julia?’

Dad meant Does Julia hate me? But not even Julia could answer that. ‘She’s...fine.’

‘Good. Good. Say hi from me.’

‘Okay.’ Tell her yourself, why don’t you? ‘How was Christmas?’

‘Oh...fine. Quiet.’ Dad looked at the pyramid of bin-bags. ‘Horrendous. For obvious reasons. Yours?’

‘Mine was horrendous too. Are you growing a beard, Dad?’

‘No, I just haven’t...maybe I will. I don’t know. Are the Richmond relatives all well?’

‘Aunt Alice’s as you’d expect, all clucky ’cause of...y’know.’

‘Of course.’

‘Alex just played on his BBC computer. Hugo’s smarmy as ever. Nigel’s doing quadratic equations for fun. Uncle Brian...’ Finishing the sentence about Uncle Brian was hard work.

‘...got drunk as a lord and prattled on about me?’

‘Dad, is Uncle Brian an idiot?’

‘He can act like one.’ Something’s unknotted in Dad. He looks hollow and unhappy but he’s definitely more peaceful. ‘But how someone acts isn’t what they are. Not necessarily. Best not to be too judgemental. Maybe there’s stuff going on you don’t know about. You know?’

I do know.

The horriblest part was, being friendly to Dad makes me feel disloyal to Mum. However much they say ‘We both still love you’ you do have to choose. Words like ‘maintenance’ and ‘best interests’ don’t leave you alone. A figure sat in the sky-blue Jetta. ‘Is...’ I didn’t know what to call her.

‘Cynthia drove me over, yes. She’d like to say hello, if...’ (a mad organist thumped my panic chords) ‘...if you’d like to.’ A pleading note bent Dad’s voice. ‘Would you?’

‘Okay.’ I didn’t want to. ‘Okay.’

Outside the cave of the garage, rain fell so lightly it wasn’t even falling. Before I’d got to the Jetta, Cynthia’d got out. She’s not a big-boobed bimbo or an evil-eyed witch. She’s frumpier than Mum, any day, and mousier. Brown hair in a bob, brown eyes. She doesn’t look a thing like a stepmother. Which is what she’ll be, by and by.

‘Hello, Jason.’ The woman Dad’d rather spend the rest of his life with than Mum looked at me like I had a gun pointed at her. ‘I’m Cynthia.’

‘Hi. I’m Jason.’ This was very, very, very weird. Neither of us tried to shake hands. In the back of her car was a BABY ON BOARD sticker. ‘You’ve

got a baby?’

‘Well, Milly’s more of a toddler now.’ If you just heard her voice next to Mum’s you’d say Mum’s posher. ‘Camilla. Milly. Milly’s father – my ex-husband – we’re already...I mean, he’s not on the scene. As they say.’

‘Right.’

Dad watched his future wife and his only son from his ex-garage.

‘Well.’ Cynthia smiled unhappily. ‘Come and visit whenever you want, Jason. Trains go to Oxford from Cheltenham, direct.’ Cynthia’s voice is less than half the volume of Mum’s. ‘Your dad would like you to. He really would. So would I. It’s a big old house we’re in. There’s a stream at the end of the garden. You could even have your—’ (she was about to say ‘your own bedroom’.) ‘Well, you’re welcome, any time.’

All I could do was nod.

‘Whenever it suits.’ Cynthia looked at Dad.

‘So how—’ I began, suddenly scared of having nothing to say.

‘If you—’ she began in the same second.

‘After you—’

‘No, after you. Really. You go ahead.’

‘How long’ (no grown-up’s ever made me go first) ‘have you known Dad?’ I’d meant the question to sound breezy but it came out all Gestapo.

‘Since we were growing up,’ Cynthia was working hard to iron out any extra meanings, ‘in Derbyshire.’

Longer than Mum, then. If Dad’d married this Cynthia in the first place, instead of Mum, and if they’d had a son, would it have been me? Or a totally different kid? Or a kid who’s half me?

All those Unborn Twins're a numbing prospect.

I got to the lake in the woods and remembered the game of British Bulldogs we'd played here when the lake froze last January. Twenty or thirty kids, skimming and shrieking, all over the shop. Tom Yew'd interrupted the game, scrambling down the path I'd just taken, on his Suzuki. He'd sat on the exact same bench I was sat on remembering him. Now Tom Yew's in a cemetery on a treeless hill on a bunch of islands we'd never even heard of last January. What's left of Tom Yew's Suzuki's being picked apart to repair other Suzukis. The world won't leave things be. It's always injecting endings into beginnings. Leaves tweezer themselves from these weeping willows. Leaves fall into the lake and dissolve into slime. Where's the sense in that? Mum and Dad fell in love, had Julia, had me. They fall out of love, Julia moves off to Edinburgh, Mum to Cheltenham and Dad to Oxford with Cynthia. The world never stops unmaking what the world never stops making.

But who says the world has to make sense?

In my dream a fishing float'd appeared in the water, orange on glossy dark, just a few feet out. Holding the rod was Squelch, sat on the other end of my bench. This dream-Squelch was so realistic in every detail, even his smell, I realized I must be awake. ‘Oh. All right, Mervyn? God, I was dreaming about...’

‘Wakey wakey stiffy shakey.’

‘...something. Been here long?’

‘Wakey wakey stiffy shakey.’

My Casio said I’d only been asleep for ten minutes. ‘Must’ve...’

‘It’ll snow soon. It’ll stick an’ all. School bus’ll get stuck.’

My joints clunked as I stretched. ‘Aren’t you watching Moonraker?’ My joints unclunked.

Squelch gave me this tragic look like I was the certified village idiot. ‘Ain’t no TV here. I’m fishin’, I am. Come to see the swan.’

‘Black Swan Green hasn’t got any swans. That’s the village joke.’

‘Crotch rot.’ Squelch shoved one hand down his pants and gave his grollies a good scratching. ‘Crotch rot.’

A robin landed on the holly bush, as if posing for a Christmas card.

‘So...what’s the biggest thing you’ve caught in this lake, Merv?’

‘Ain’t never caught bugger all. Not down this end. I fishes up the narrer end, up by the island, don’t I?’

‘So what’s the biggest thing you’ve caught up the narrow end?’

‘Ain’t never caught bugger all up the narrer end, neither.’

‘Oh.’

Squelch gave me a lidded look. ‘Got a big fat tench one time. Roasted the bugger on a stick, in our garden. His eyes was the tastiest bit. Last spring, that were. Or the spring before. Or the spring before that.’

An ambulance siren’s wail bagatelled through the bare wood.

‘Somebody dying,’ I asked Squelch, ‘d’you reckon?’

‘Debby Crombie off to hospital. Her babby’s poppin’ out.’

Rooks craw...craw...crawed, like old people who’ve forgotten why they’ve come upstairs. ‘I’m leaving Black Swan Green today.’

‘See yer.’

‘You probably won’t.’

Squelch lifted one leg and out flubberdubbered a fart so loud the robin on the holly flew off in fright.

The orange float sat motionless in the water.

‘Do you remember that kitten you found, Merv, last year, frozen stiff?’

‘Don’t like Kit-Kats. Only Crème Eggs and Twixes.’

The orange float sat motionless in the water.

‘Want these Rhubarb and Custards?’

‘Nope.’ Squelch stuffed the bag into his coat pocket. ‘Not partick’ly.’

Whatever it was swooped so low, so close, over our heads, I could've brushed it with my fingertips if shock hadn't curled me up on the bench. I didn't see it for what it was at first. A glider...My brain grappled with the shape of the thing, a Concorde...a mutant angel falling to earth...

A swan slid down its slope of air to meet its reflection.

A swan's reflection slid up its slope of lake to meet the swan.

Just before impact, the giant bird splayed open its wings and its webby feet pedaled cartoonishly. It hung there, then crashed in a belly-flop of water. Ducks heckled the swan, but a swan only notices what it wishes to. She bent and unbent her neck exactly like Dad does after a very long drive.

If swans weren't real myths'd make them up.

I uncurled myself from panic position. Squelch hadn't even flinched.

The orange float bobbed on the ripples and cross-ripples.

'Sorry, Mervyn,' I told Squelch. 'You were right.'

You're never sure where Squelch is looking.

The wild bushes that'd muffled the House in the Woods'd been sawn back to size. Naked white branches lay in a neat pile on a lawn not used to the light. The front door stood half open and a power tool was being used inside. It fell quiet. Nottingham Forest were playing West Bromich Albion on a paint-spattered tranny. Loud hammering broke out.

The garden path'd been hacked clear. ‘Hello?’

More hammering.

‘Hello?’

Down the hall, a builder my dad’s age but musclier had a sledgehammer in one hand and a chisel in the other. ‘Help you with anything, son?’

‘I...don’t want to, uh...bother you.’

The builder made a Hang on a mo gesture and switched off the radio.

‘Sorry,’ I said.

‘Nah worries. Cloughie’s mob are flamin’ stuffin’ us. It’s damagin’ me ears.’ His accent could’ve come from another planet. ‘I could use a breather anyhow. Puttin’ in damp courses is a killer. I must be stark raving mad doin’ it meself.’ He sat on the bottom stair, opened his Thermos flask and poured some coffee. ‘What can I do for you, anyhow?’

‘There’s...does an old woman live here?’

‘Me mother-in-law? Mrs Gretton?’

‘Quite old. Black clothes. White hair.’

‘That’s her. The grandmother from the Addams Family.’

‘Sort of.’

‘She’s moved into our granny flat, just across the way. You know her, do you?’

‘I’ (Hangman choked ‘know’) ‘expect this’ll sound weird, but one year ago, I hurt my ankle. When the lake in the woods froze over. It was late. I sort of hobbled up to here from the lake, and knocked on her door—’

‘So that was you?’ The builder’s face lit up with surprise. ‘She fixed you up with a whatchamagooley, a poultice, right?’

‘That’s right. It really worked.’

‘I’ll say it works! She did me wrist a couple of years back. Miraculous, it was. But the wife and I were sure she’d made you up.’

‘Made me up?’

‘Even before her stroke, she was a little...away with the fairies, like. We thought you were one of her,’ he did a horror-film voice, ‘drowned boys, like, from the lake.’

‘Oh. Well. She’d fallen asleep by the time I left—’

‘Just like her, that is! Bet she locked you in, an’ all?’

‘Actually, she did, so I never thanked her for fixing my ankle.’

‘Tell her now, if you want.’ The builder sort of vaccuumed up his coffee so it didn’t burn his lips. ‘No guarantees she’ll remember you, or speak, but she’s having quite a good day. See that yellow building, out the back, just through them trees? That’s us.’

‘But...I thought this place was...miles from anywhere.’

‘Here? Nah! Just between Pig Lane and the quarry. Where the gypsies camp in the autumn. This whole wood’s only a few acres, y’know. Two or three footy pitches, tops. Hardly Amazonia. Hardly Sherwood Forest.’

‘There’s this kid, Ross Wilcox, in the village. He was one of those kids on the ice, last year, when you found me, just outside your house...’

Very old faces go muppety and sexless and their skin goes see-through.

A thermostat clicked on and a heater starting humming.

‘There, there,’ Mrs Gretton murmured, ‘there, there...’

‘I haven’t told anyone this. Not even Dean, my best mate.’

The yellow room smelt of crumpets, crypts and carpet.

‘At the Goose Fair last November, I found Wilcox’s wallet. With loads of money in it. I mean, loads. I knew it was his ’cause it had his photo. You’ve got to understand that Wilcox was picking on me, all last year. A lot of it was...pretty evil stuff. Sadistic. So I kept it.’

‘So it goes,’ Mrs Gretton murmured, ‘so it goes...’

‘Wilcox was frantic. But the money was his dad’s and his dad’s a total psycho. ’Cause he was so scared about that, Wilcox had a bust-up with his girlfriend. ’Cause of that, his girlfriend got off with Grant Burch. ’Cause of that, Ross Wilcox nicked Grant Burch’s motorbike. Well, his brother’s. Tore off on it, skidded at the crossroads. Lost’ – this could only be whispered – ‘half his leg. His leg. You see? It’s my fault. If I’d just...given him back his wallet, he’d be walking. Hobbling up to your old house over there on a sprained ankle last year was bad enough. But Ross Wilcox...his leg stops at this...stump.’

‘Time for bed,’ Mrs Gretton murmured, ‘time for bed...’

The window had a view of the yard and the house where Joe the builder lives with his family. A crocodilish dog waddled by, holding a giant red bra in its grinnily mouth.

‘Ziggy! Ziggy!’ A puffing, angry giantess ran after. ‘Get back ’ere!’

‘Ziggy! Ziggy!’ Two little kids ran after the giantess. ‘Get back ’ere!’

Was there a sharp Mrs Gretton inside the senile Mrs Gretton, listening to me, judging me?

‘I sometimes want to stick a javelin through my temples, just so I can stop thinking about how guilty I am. But then I think, well, if Wilcox hadn’t been such a git, I would’ve handed it over. If it was anyone else’s, ’cept Neal Brose maybe, it’d’ve been like, “Hey, you idiot, you dropped this.” Like a shot. So...it’s Wilcox’s fault too, isn’t it? And if consequences of consequences of consequences of what you do’re your fault too, you’d never leave your house, right? So Ross Wilcox losing his leg isn’t my fault. But it is. But it isn’t. But it is.’

‘Full up to here,’ Mrs Gretton murmured, ‘full up to here...’

The giantess’d got one end of her bra. Ziggy’d got the other.

The two little kids shrieked with bliss.

I hadn’t stammered once, the whole time I’d been talking to Mrs Gretton. S’pose it isn’t Hangman who causes it? S’pose it’s the other person? The other person’s expectations. S’pose that’s why I can read aloud in an empty room, perfectly, or to a horse, or a dog, or myself? (Or Mrs Gretton, who might’ve been listening to a voice but I’m pretty sure it wasn’t mine.) S’pose there’s a time fuse lit when it’s a human listening, like a stick of Tom and Jerry dynamite? S’pose if you don’t get the word out before this fuse is burnt away, a couple of seconds, say, the dynamite goes off? S’pose what triggers the stammer’s the stress of hearing that fuse going ssssssss? S’pose you could make that fuse infinitely long, so that the dynamite’d never go off? How?

By honestly not caring how long the other person’ll have to wait for me. Two seconds? Two minutes? No, two years. Sitting in Mrs Gretton’s yellow room it seemed so obvious. If I can reach this state of not caring, Hangman’ll remove his finger from my lips.

A thermostat clicked off and a heater stopped humming.

‘Took for ever,’ Mrs Gretton murmured, ‘took for ever.’

Joe the builder knocked at the door frame. ‘Getting on okay?’

A black-and-white photo of a submarine in an icy port hung by my coat. The crew all stood on deck, saluting. Old photographs always go with old people. I zipped up my black parka. ‘That’s her brother, Lou,’ said Joe. ‘Front row, far right.’ Joe placed his chipped fingernail by a face. ‘That’s him.’ Lou was little more than a shadow cast by a nose.

‘A brother?’ That was familiar. ‘Mrs Gretton talked about how I mustn’t wake her brother.’

‘What, just now?’

‘No, last January.’

‘Not much hope of waking Lou. German destroyer sank his sub in 1941, off the Orkneys. She,’ Joe nodded back at Mrs Gretton, ‘never really got over it, poor love.’

‘God. Must’ve been terrible.’

‘War.’ Joe said it like it answered most questions. ‘War.’

The young submariner was sinking into blank white.

Through Lou’s eyes, mind, we’re the ones sinking.

‘I should be off.’

‘Rightio. And I’ve got a damp course to get back to.’

The path back to the House in the Woods crunched underfoot. I picked up a perfect pine cone. Coming-soon snow’d shuttered up the sky. ‘Where are you from, Joe?’

‘Me? Can you not tell from how I speak?’

‘I know it’s not Worcestershire, but—’

He turned his accent up to its maximum. “I’m a Brummie, our kid.”

‘A Brummie?’

‘Aye. If you’re from Brum, you’re a Brummie. Brum’s Birmingham.’

‘So that’s what a Brummie is.’

‘Another of life’s great mysteries,’ Joe waved goodbye with a pair of storky pliers, ‘unveiled.’

‘DEAD!’

Or that’s what it sounded like. But who’d shout that word in a wood, and why? Had it been ‘Dave’? Or ‘Dad’? Just where the faint path from the House in the Woods meets the path to the lake, footsteps came pounding my way. Between a pair of wishbone pines I squeezed myself out of sight.

The word arrowed through the trees, much nearer. ‘DEAD!’

Seconds later Grant Burch flew by at full pelt. He wasn’t the shouter. Terror’d turned him pale. Who could’ve scared Grant Burch like that? Ross Wilcox’s dad the mechanic? Or Pluto Noak? He’d gone before I could even think of asking him.

‘YOU’RE DEAD, BURCH!’

Philip Phelps crashed round the bend, just twenty paces after Grant Burch. Not any Philip Phelps I’ve ever seen, mind. This Philip Phelps was cracked and crimson with a pure rage that’d only be calmed by Grant Burch’s broken body limp in its claws.

‘DEEEAAAAAAD!!!’

Philip Phelps’s got bigger in the last few months. I’d never noticed till I saw him roar by my hiding place.

Soon the boys and the fury were swallowed up by the wood.

How Grant Burch pushed docile Philip Phelps over the edge, I’ll never learn. That was the last time I’ll ever clap eyes on them.

The world’s a headmaster who works on your faults. I don’t mean in a mystical or a Jesus way. More how you’ll keep tripping over a hidden step, over and over, till you finally understand: Watch out for that step! Everything that’s wrong with us, if we’re too selfish or too Yes, Sir, No, Sir Three Bags Full, Sir or too anything, that’s a hidden step. Either you suffer

the consequences of not noticing your fault for ever, or one day, you do notice it, and fix it. Joke is, once you get it into your brain about that hidden step, and think Hey, life isn't such a shit-house after all again, then BUMP! Down you go, a whole new flight of hidden steps.

There are always more.

My OXO tin's hidden under a loose floorboard where my bed was. I got it out for the final time and sat on my window sill. If the ravens leave the Tower of London the tower'll fall, Miss Throckmorton told us. This OXO tin is the secret raven of 9 Kingfisher Meadows, Black Swan Green, Worcestershire. (The house won't actually fall but a new family'll move in and a new kid'll claim this room as his own and never, once, think about me. Just as I've never once thought about who was here before us.) In the Second World War this same OXO tin went to Singapore and back with my granddad. I used to press my ear against it and listen for Chinese rickshaw pullers or Japanese Zeros or a monsoon puffing away a village on stilts. Its lid's so tight it guffs when you open it. Granddad kept letters in it, and loose tobacco. Inside it now there's an ammonite called *Lytoceras fimbriatum*, a geologist's little hammer that used to be Dad's, the sponge bit of my only ever cigarette, *Le Grand Meaulnes* in French (with Madame Crommelynck's Christmas card from a mountain town in Patagonia not in *The Times* Atlas of the World, signed Mme. Crommelynck and Her Butler), Jimmy Carter's concrete nose, a face carved out of tyre rubber, a woven wristband I nicked off the first girl I ever kissed, and the remains of an Omega Seamaster my granddad bought in Aden before I was born. Photos're better than nothing, but things're better than photos 'cause the things themselves were part of what was there.

The removal lorry shook itself into life, grated its gears, and lumbered down Kingfisher Meadows to the main road. Yasmin Morton-Bagot and Mum lugged a last box into Mum's Datsun. Dad called Yasmin Morton-Bagot a Hooray Henrietta once, and maybe she is one, but Hooray Henrietas can be as tough as Hell's Angels. Julia fitted a laundry basket, a wound-up washing line and a bag of pegs into Yasmin Morton-Bagot's Alfa Romeo.

T minus five minutes, I reckoned.

The net curtain in Mr Castle's bedroom twitched. Mrs Castle came close to the glass like a drowned face. She peered down at Mum, Julia and Yasmin Morton-Bagot.

What big eyes Mrs Castle has.

She felt me watching her and our eyes met. Quick as a minnow, the net curtain twitched back.

Julia received my telepathic signal and looked up at me.

I half waved.

‘I’ve been sent to get you.’ My sister’s footsteps clopped into my room. ‘Dead or alive. Could start snowing any minute. The radio said ice sheets and woolly mammoths are moving down the M5, so we’d better get going.’

‘Okay.’ I didn’t move off my window-sill perch.

‘Much louder without carpets and curtains, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah.’ Like the house hasn’t got any clothes on. ‘Much.’ Our quiet voices boomed and even daylight was a notch whiter.

‘I always envied you your room.’ Julia leant on my window sill. Her new hair suits her, once you get used to it. ‘You can keep an eye on the neighbours from here. Spy on the Woolmeres and the Castles.’

‘I envied you yours.’

‘What? Up in the attic like a Victorian pot-scrubber?’

‘You can see right up the bridlepath to the Malverns.’

‘When a storm was on I thought the whole roof was going to lift off, like in The Wizard of Oz. Used to petrify me.’

‘That’s difficult to imagine.’

Julia toyed with the platinum dolphin necklace Stian’d given her. ‘What’s difficult to imagine?’

‘Difficult to imagine anything ever petrifying you.’

‘Well, behind my fearless fauade, little brother, I am regularly scared witless by all manner of things. But how stupid of us. Why on earth didn’t we just swap rooms?’

The echoey house asked its far corners but no answer rebounded back.

Our right to be here is weaker by the minute.

Some snowdrops'd come out in the boggy spot, by Dad's greenhouse. By Dad's ex-greenhouse.

'What was the name of that game,' Julia stared down, 'when we were kids? I described it to Stian. Where we'd chased each other round and round the house and the first one to catch up with the other won?'

"“Round-and-Round-the-House”."

'That was it! Apt title.' Julia was trying to cheer me up again.

'Yeah,' I let her think it was working, 'and you hid behind the oil tank one time and watched me sprint past for thirty minutes like a total prat.'

'Not thirty minutes. You caught on after twenty, at most.'

But it's okay for Julia. On Monday her cool boyfriend will land in Cheltenham in his black Porsche, she'll just hop in, and off they'll zoom to Edinburgh. On Monday I've got to go to a new school in a new town and be the New Kid Whose Parents By the Way Are Getting Divorced. I don't even have a proper uniform yet.

'Jason?'

'Yeah?'

'Any idea why Eliot Bolivar stopped writing poems for the parish magazine?'

Just six months ago Julia saying that'd've mortified me, but my sister'd asked it seriously. Was she bluffing, to draw me out? No. How long'd she known? But who cares?

'He smuggled his poems into that bonfire Dad lit for his Greenland paperwork. He told me the fire turned all his poems into masterpieces.'

‘I hope,’ Julia bit at a spike of fingernail, ‘he hasn’t given up writing altogether. He’s got literary promise. When you next run into him, tell him from me to stick at it, will you?’

‘Okay.’

Yasmin Morton-Bagot fumbled through her glove compartment and got out a map.

‘The weirdest thing,’ my fingers drummed the OXO tin, ‘is leaving the house without Dad. I mean, he ought to be running around now, turning off the boiler, the water, the gas...’ This divorce’s like in a disaster film when a crack zigzags along the street and a chasm opens up under someone’s feet. I’m that someone. Mum’s on one side with Julia, Dad’s on the other with Cynthia. If I don’t jump one way or the other I’m going to fall into bottomless blackness. ‘Checking windows, one last time, checking the lecky. Like when we went on holidays up to Oban or the Peak District or somewhere.’

I haven’t cried about the divorce once. I’m not going to now.

No bloody way am I crying! I’ll be fourteen in a few days.

‘It’ll be all right,’ Julia’s gentleness makes it worse, ‘in the end, Jace.’

‘It doesn’t feel very all right.’

‘That’s because it’s not the end.’

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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Contents](#)

[TitlePage](#)

[Also by David Mitchell](#)

[January Man](#)

[Hangman](#)

[Relatives](#)

[Bridlepath](#)

[Rocks](#)

[Spooks](#)

[Solarium](#)

[Souvenirs](#)

[Maggot](#)

[Knife Grinder](#)

[Goose Fair](#)

[Disco](#)

[January Man](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)